


RECENT POETRY ON THE PRAIRIE

by

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Preface

To happy memories of the years spent on a ranch on the banks of the Cimarron I owe my interest in prairie literature. For this particular subject I am indebted to Professor S. L. Whitcomb, and for ready aid in securing material to Mr. Earl N. Manchester, his assistants, and Mr. Richard L. Roehen. To Professor J. H. Nelson I am particularly grateful for his helpful suggestions and his patient, constructive criticism.

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CONTENTS

| Chapter | | Page |
|---------|---------------------------------|------|
| I | Introduction | 1 |
| II | The Spirit of the West | 5 |
| III | Cowboy Ballads | 27 |
| IV | Poems on Prairie Life | 57 |
| V | Lyrics on Nature in the Prairie | 93 |
| VI | Neihardt's Epic Cycle | 114 |
| VII | Conclusion | 136 |
| | BIBLIOGRAPHY | |

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Of the vast land stretched out between the two mountain ridges that line either side of our continent poets have only begun to sing. They are now revelling in the barren immensity that was. Much of the awesome sweep has been converted into conventional farm lands; but for the inspiration of these singers of happy Yesterdays there are yet west of the Mississippi wide tracts of semi-wasteland with long eerie distances of earth and sky and all the native freedom, charm, and somberness of a wild land.

The vast emptiness of the land has never failed to stir the souls of men who see and feel intensely. On some the effect has been oppressive. Charles Dickens in recounting his impression of the American prairie said: "Great as the picture was, its very flatness and extent, which left nothing to the imagination, tamed it down and cramped its interest. It was lovely and wild, but oppressive in its barren monotony. I felt that in traversing the Prairies, I could never abandon myself to the scenes, forgetful of all else." ¹

1. Dorothy Anne Dunbare's The Prairies and the Making of Middle America: Four Centuries of Description, The Torch Press, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1926, p. 290.

Whether this disparaging remark was prompted by a natural dislike for barrenness or his prejudices toward America in general we do not know; but we do know that on many men as strong an opposite effect was produced. Men have loved the land and gloried in its vastness, its barrenness, and its freedom. Unlike Dickens, they feel that its very emptiness leaves everything to the imagination--that there are no hindrances to thought and no limits to the range of the mind. They feel that their minds are lured on into the infinity of the distances to roam at random in ethereal spheres and grasp at the outlying eternal realities.

The land has never lacked visionary dreamers. In fact, it has a tendency to develop them. But the frontier demanded action, not dreaming; and the men who saw and felt and had an urge to write were compelled to smother their dreams and enlist in the hand-to-hand struggle with the land. And while poetry was being written about the seas, mountains, and forests, the poets who would have written about the prairie were battling vigorously with the frontier.

Now the climax of the battle is over. The stubborn land has yielded, and there is no more to be conquered. The Western world has begun to relax, and poets for the first time in the history of the plains

have time to dream and sing. The outcome of the short breathing space shows that the land did not fail in inspiration or lack in genius. From everywhere come the voices of poets who are keenly alive to the land in which they live. They sing of the battle with the frontier and exult in the victory. Some untainted, visionary spirits lament the passing of their virgin world and sing songs of whole-souled appreciation to the Spirit of the wide sky and the big Western land. Badger Clark in his breezy outdoor verses is most apt in impressing his readers with the big, clean spirit of the place. Others have succeeded in doing it in individual poems. The recently collected cowboy ballads give an adequate, unornamented picture of the type of big-hearted, care-free, unpretentious characters the land produces. Edwin Ford Piper vividly and sympathetically chronicles the development of the frontier by picturing the homely everyday incidents in the lives of the men, women, and children who braved the land's first rebuffs and shared in its conquest. John G. Neihardt in his epic cycle recounts episodes--"saga-stuff"--of the trappers and traders who explored and conquered the land west of the Missouri River. Today a new school of younger poets has arisen---a group who do not sing of the glory of an old land dying but of the greed and materialism

of the new world that has emerged. Their songs are not rapturous lyrical outbursts of love for the land, but cool, disinterested, realistic pictures. The two schools together give a very complete chronicle of the evolution of the prairie.

The poetry treating of the prairie is naturally not first class art. The prairie would be no more likely to produce first class poetry than a first class culture. Mr. Neihardt in his serious attempt to produce classical poetry quite naturally lost the spirit of the big, crude, uncultured world he was dealing with. The natural poetic products of the prairie are homely human verses pervaded by a big, friendly spirit---verses with the ruggedness of nature rather than the finish of art. To show through these simple verses the spirit that is breathing in them---the big, kindly spirit of the plains that upheld the struggling pioneers and is now working freely in the sensitive souls of poets---is the aim of the work.

Chapter II

THE SPIRIT OF THE WEST

Through effects wrought by some intangible influence the Western character has become a distinct type. He seems to grow like the land---big, open, and rugged. Recently attempts have been made to analyze this subtle, effective spirit; but it works so quietly and so diversely that the analyses are necessarily vague.

Not many years ago the West was a big, untamed land. Its very bigness and emptiness seemed to inspire awe. There was nothing but a blank infinity of sky and an undulating waste of land stretching away to meet the skyline. Such a world had to have some effect, and it did. Men looked---and wondered---and unconsciously grew glad. The wide, breezy spaces seemed to breed in their souls a love of life; and the wild, unafraid things of the big, airy world added to men's gladness. About them the prairie-dogs scampered, stretched up on their hind legs, and yelped as they had always done; and they did it entirely unconscious of the existence of man. The big-eyed owls hooted, the coyotes howled, the buzzards sailed in the far heavens; and all the world was perfectly natural.

Such a bigness and naturalness gripped the hearts of those who lived long in it. The lives of the prairie dwellers became saturated with the airiness

and freedom of the land, and they soon seemed a part of the natural life of the plains.

Poets have felt keenly this big, untainted freshness that seems to weave itself so strongly into the heartstrings of its people. They sing, almost rapturously, of the quickening effect of the blankness and infinity. They know that the wide, open spaces and the far-away sky-rim mean life---unhampered freedom; and, with the prairie people, they wholeheartedly

pity the dwellers in cities

Who see but a scrap of the sky

And a scrap of the earth. ¹

Just as strongly they hate close, cramped, airless places with poisoned, irritating atmospheres.

If you have hated noisy tenements,

Smudge, and stale air, and grooves of

oily thought

Sliding to money, and the slums of love

Maladorous against the tang of March:

And if a great wind came to carry you

Out to the wilderness-----

----Then you will know. ²

1. "On the Plains of Kansas" by May Williams Ward in Helen Rhoda Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 119.
2. "Sundown Valley" in Edwin Ford Piper's Paintrock Roads, p. 5.

The prairie people know. Through their sense of sympathy with untamed nature they have come in touch with the Infinite. They have felt a big, awesome peace swoop down from the eternity of sky to take possession of their souls, and they feel that glad contentment is indigeneous to the prairie---that it is bred by the big outdoor world. They are always eager to be "turned loose on them hills a spell", and after the 'turning-loose' they inevitably conclude:

Say, a minute of that is worth a
Week in town.

The poem ends airily:

We'll all get to Heaven by-and-by

But we'll travel outdoors: eh Johnny-Jo? ³

The same author in a poem called "Twittering Bill" has his hero

Drifting out of the living day
Into the spaces wavering, dim,
That seemed to open their arms to him. ⁴

Many of the poets sing of the immensity of the land. The long distances seem to awake the imagination and to lure the soul to reach out after the eternal realities that lie just beyond the thought-range. Men grasp at the unattainable truths and come away with humbled, purified minds and an intensified love for the

3. "Eh, Johnny-Jo" in H.E. Knibb's Riders of the Stars, p.56.

4. Saddle Songs and Other Verse, p.19.

land. Clell Goebel Gannon in "If I Were There" says:

We'd sleep beneath the Western sky
 And bask beneath her sun,
 To find the world just as she
 Was when all the stars were young.

.....

We'd leave the city streets behind
 And travel for the prairies,
 Where the spaces clear the mind.⁵

Thomas T. Johnston in a poem entitled "God's Big,
 Good West" sings of:

God's distances
 That lead away
 At crystal dawn,
 Lure dream and prayer
 To Infinities out there
 Where thought has gone.⁶

Such sentiments are variously expressed by
 other poets. Badger Clark is especially apt in
 giving his verses the airy, outdoor flavor. They

5. Songs of the Bunch-Grass Acres, p. 76.

6. The Prairies, p. 24.

are full of spirit and freshness. He seems to be able to say what many lovers of the plains have felt:

'Twas good to live when all the sod,
 Without no fence nor fuss,
 Belonged in pardnership to God,
 The Gover'ment and us.
 With skyline bounds from east to west
 And room to go and come,
 I loved my fellowman the best
 When he was scattered some.

.....

When my old soul hunts range and rest
 Beyond the last divide,
 Just plant me in some stretch of West
 That's sunny, lone, and wide. ⁷

Born of a free, world wandering race,
 Little we yearned o'er an oft-turned sod.
 What did we care for the father's place,
 Having ours fresh from the hand of God? ⁸

7. "The Old Cowman" in Sun and Saddle Leather (9th ed.)
 p. 92.

8. "The Plainsman" Ibid p. 95.

The following quotations are taken from "A Cowboy's Prayer":

I love creation better as it stood
 That day You finished it so long ago
 And looked upon Your Work and called
 it good.

.....

Just let me live my life as I've begun
 And give me a work that's open to the sky;
 Make me a pardner of the wind and sun
 And I won't ask a life that's soft and high.⁹

Badger Clark's characters seem to have felt like the old settler who said when he found a few cattle with strange brands straying into his eighty-mile solitude, "It's getting too crowded here---guess I'll move on."

Just why this primitive, unmanned world should get such an irresistible hold on its people is a sort of mystery. They did not want to love it. The feeling grew in spite of themselves. In fact, many thought they hated the maddening loneliness, the eternal monotony, and the soul-tearing hardships. Some rose

9. Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 50.

to go away and even went away---and then heard
 'the voice of the prairie calling' them---luring
 them back. Clell Goebel Gannon's "The Law of
 Dakota" is the expression of a spirit, not
 peculiar to Dakota but to the entire West.
 Mr. Gannon says each of Dakota's sons

Must return to the land of his people
 Or never be happy again.¹⁰

In the "Song of Leaving" Mr. Gannon sings:

Oh, I'm leaving Dakota tonight, I am
 Oh, I'm leaving Dakota tonight.
 The prairies have got me and got me outright
 I'm leaving my heart in Dakota tonight
 I can't take it with me---I haven't the
 might.¹¹

Elliott C. Lincoln in "The Third Year" has his settler
 say:

Three years ago the city held for me
 All that I loved. I feared this empty view
 Of Sagebrush scrawled upon a baking plain.
 These long years, can they have forged a chain

10. Songs of the Bunch Grass Acres, p. 37.

11. Ibid, p. 88.

Too strong to break? Have old gods
changed for new? 12

Without suggesting a solution for the mystery, Stella P. Baisch gives us a true picture of the development of this strange feeling for the land.

True, I have feared the prairie
As I gauged the mighty sweep
Of its undulating vastness,
Awesome as the nether deep.
And I have loathed the prairie
When its freedom was a pain,
Where no hills could hold the furies
Hurtling through the wind and rain.
But ah, I love the prairie
With its subtle, luring call
Beauty, promise, vastness, wilderness
Clutch my fancy, hold me thrall.¹³

Formerly the prairie not only persisted in keeping its own but drew men on---farther into itself. Many of the early settlers followed this westward pull because they seemed not to be able to resist the spell

12. Rhymes of a Homesteader, p. 56.

13. "Prairie Moods" (Author's manuscript)

of the wanderlust. In "The Habit" Berton Braley expresses the feeling of such men:

I settled down quite frequent, and I says,
 says I,
 "I'll never wander further till I come to die",
 But the wind it sorter chuckles, "Why O'
 course you will"
 An' sure enough I does it 'cause I can't
 keep still.¹⁴

Whether the loneliness of the West breeds a deep thoughtfulness, or the magnitude of it inspires reverence, or whether God actually lives nearer frontiersmen because they are in his very own unadulterated world, is difficult to say. At any rate, it is true that the first prairie-folk were deeply, sincerely religious. Even the profane, carefree cowboys had tender hearts regarding pure unpretending religion. The sentiment seemed to grow in the[^], often in spite of themselves. The Great Spirit of the plains bred the feeling even in those who had formerly

14. Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 158.

disregarded or despised 'the faith of their fathers'.
 Men have long been conscious of this prairie power.
 Elliott C. Lincoln's cowboy interprets it thus:

When I'm out with the bunch in town,
 I'm jest as t~~h~~ough as I kin be;
 It's pretty nearly ten to one
 That God ain't apt to notice me.

But home here where it's bare, brown plain
 Fer miles an' miles on every side,
 I sorter stick right up in sight,
 God couldn't miss me if he tried.

'Tain't cause I like it that I'm good,
 The days I'm workin' on the ranch:
 There ain't a soul for God to watch
 But me, I dassent take the chance.¹⁵

The conclusion of the "Cowboy Alone With his Conscience"
 is a similar one.

Take the very meanest sinner that the nation
 ever say,

15. "Ethics" in Rhymes of a Homesteader, p. 29.

One that don't respect religion more'n
 he respects the law,
One that never does an action that's
 commendable or good,
An' immerse him fur a season out in
 Nature's solitude,
An' the cog-wheels o' his conscience 'll
 be rattled out o' gear.
More ' if he 'tended preachin' every Sunday
 in the year.
Fur his sin 'ill come a ridin' through his
 cranium rough shod,
When t^r ain't nobody near him, 'ceptin God. 16

The night-sky and the stars seem to have been ~~an~~ important factors in developing this sentiment. The stars, especially, had a strange fascination for the prairie dwellers and tended to draw their thoughts Heavenward. In "The Stars" Clell Goebel Gannon says:

All is so still---so big, I scarce can speak,
My words all seem so paltry and so weak,
I only dare to think----

• • • • •

For in the beauty of the Lights that trod
 Above the world tonight
 I think I grasp a vision of God.¹⁷

The cowboys who slept out under the stars
 during the long night-watches felt their power keenly.
 "Maver\$ick Bill" says to his comrade:

young feller, I know them stars iz eyes
 Of angels gone to glory---the glories in the
 skies.
 I ''spect my mother is looking at me---suar!
 She went to find our Fanny---the family's
 over there.
 Sometimes upon these prairies that I so oft
 hev trod
 I feel so high-falutin'--I kinder walks with
 God. ¹⁸

Nearly all the poets attribute the mysterious
 influence of the prairie to the more direct communion
 it allows with the Infinite. They express the same
 thought in many ways and give the Spirit various
 names. Badger Clark says:

Sometimes you can almost see Him there,

17. Songs of the Bunch-Grass Acres, p. 54.

18. Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 86.

As He sits alone on the blue-gray hills,
 A-thinkin' of things that's beyond our ken
 And restin' Himself from the noise of men. 19

In another poem Mr. Clark sings;

God of the open, though I am so simple
 Out in the wind I can travel with you,

.....

Too far you are for the reach of my hand,
 Yet I can feel your big heart when it beats
 Friendly and warm in the sun or storm.
 Are you the same as the God of the Streets? 20

It is, probably, from Mr. Clark's warm,
 friendly 'God of the Open' that the scattered westerners
 have caught their big-hearted friendliness; or perhaps,
 there were so few people to love that ^{they} naturally felt
 like loving everyone. Birth, rank, or wealth made no
 difference. Everyone was accepted at face value and
 had to prove himself unworthy of friendship before
 he was thought to be so. The land bred a feeling of
 brotherhood, and this spirit of human-kinship seems

19. Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 86.

20. "God on the Open" in Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 169.

to have grown in them as naturally as the sagebrush and prairie grasses grew about them. The West is where

A man makes friends without half trying.²¹

Badger Clark explains the unprejudiced fairness with which men are accepted in the West.

I waste no thought on my neighbor's birth

Or the way he makes his prayer.

I grant him a white man's room on earth

If his game is only square.

While he plays it straight I'll call him mate;

If he cheats I drop him flat.

Old class and rank are a worn out lie,

For all clean men are as good as I,

And a king is only that.²²

Their friendliness is not a thing to be played with, though. Insincerity, falseplay, and insult are among the sins true Westerners cannot bear. They are often unmerciful in wreaking vengeance on an offender. The Western temper is wholly as unrestrained as the rest of the heart.

21. "Out Where the West Begins" by Arthur Chapman in Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 1.

22. "The Westerner" in Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 99.

So when some high-collared herrin' jeered
 the garb that I was wearin'
 'Twasn't long till we had got where talkin'
 ends,
 And he et his illbred chat, with a sauce of
 derby hat,
 While my merry pardners entertained his
 friends. 23

All these different phases of the prairie spirit---its infinity, its tendency to draw men's thoughts Heavenward, and its friendliness--necessarily wrought some effect on the people in the land. Bruce M. McDaniel calls the desert a soul-mender.

As the old gray-haired mender of broken toys
 Fills the empty dolls with sawdust, and
 Spirit puts into the dusty wooden soldier,
 So the Desert pours new Faith into empty
 hearts of men,
 and mends the shattered, dimming souls of
 life. 24

"The Voice of the Desert" by Mr. McDaniel has the same

23. "From Town" in Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 48.

24. "The Desert-Mender" in Bruch W. McDaniel's The Desert, p. 18.

idea:

Who comes to me with Faith and open heart
Yield I my soul. 25

Undoubtedly, the hardships of prairie life
and the heavy responsibility the land thrust upon the
shoulders of its people was also effective in molding
character. A prairie mother was

a woman rich in life,
Wisely controlled, renewed abundantly
For others; vivid, till subdued by toil
To her surroundings; limpid, loving Truth
Worshipping Right, a living loyalty! 26

"The Birthright" is another picture of a character
formed by the prairie:

Her father's father was a pioneer
And back of him his fathers broke the sod
On strong meadows consecrate to God;
Daughter of kings her lineage runs clear.
For heritage they gave her strength and toil
And set a steady light within her eyes;
Reality does not shock her nor surprise.

25. "The Desert", p. 22.

26. "Portulacas in the Wheat" by Grace Stone Coates,
The Midland 310:413 Nov. 1924.

She is maternal as the fecund soil
Her close familiars are death and birth
And the long wheels of winter and of spring.
She knows the sturdy medicine of mirth;
She knows the peace the treading years can
bring;
She is as changeless as the far blue haze
Rimming the wide horizon of her days. 27

The picture of the characters shaped by the prairie are by no means all pleasant. There were men and women who could not bear the stern, refining process of prairie life. Their souls did not stand the strain and come out purified and ennobled as did those of their stronger comrades. Many emerged the subdued, lifeless characters pictured by Raymond Kresensky in "The Ragged Edge".

Women--like the yellow grasses in the sloughs
Where the buffalo have trampled---broken,
With sunken chests, and back
That look like packs---limp sunbonnets--
These ride.
Their hands hanging between their knees,
Where the thin calico dips to the seat,

27. Gwendolen Haste, The Midland 310:270 June, July,
Aug. 1924.

Are like dead prairie chickens.
Their hair is yellow against a coffee-
brown face.

These brown faces show marks
Where the wrinkles have laid in.

Here come the men.
Stiff back whiskers and clothes
Gray with dust.
They are like the scrub oaks
That grow along the streams.
Their backs are bent and their heads
Dig into piles of yellow dust,
Stirred up by the slow teams.

• • • • •

These are the men.
They work and poke lazy teams
With willow poles. 28

Perhaps, after all, only their bodies were broken. For, in spite of the life-wrenching power of the big, virgin world, men loved it whole-heartedly and became sadly wistful to see it going. They bewail the coming of fences, of cities, and railroads.

They long for the days that were---for the peace and unhampered freedom of an untamed land. With the coming of civilization they feel the spirit of the land going from them, and they dread losing that feeling of nearness to the Infinite. Badger Clark again aptly phrases the sentiments of these lovers of freedom.

Oh, it's squeak! squeak! squeak!

Closer and closer cramps the wire.

There's hardly play to back away

And call a man a liar.

Their house has locks on every door,

Their land is in a crate.

These ain't the plains of God no more,

They're only real estate.

.....

Job cussed his birthday, night and morn,

In his old land of Uz,

But I'm just glad I wasn't born

No later than I was! 29

Many of the staunch, big-hearted fighters who loved battling with an untamed land tried to keep pace with the Westward shifting frontier. They disliked the changes civilization brought. They felt that

new conditions were cramping, that they were being robbed of their freedom, and that the land which they had loved so passionately had become a new land. In a poem entitled "The Finish" Clell Goebel Gannon says:

When the final page is written in the
history of the West,
And the cowboy and the Redman all have
gone beyond the Crest
Of the hills that rim the skyline unto
other lands unguessed,
.....Why I don't want to be there.

When they've tamed it, and they've shamed it
When they've put it up for sale,
And the final chapter's written, why I'll
search to find a trail
That will lead to God's great someplace
Where the hungry buzzards sail
.....Cause that's where I want to be.

But the inevitable law of progress, beyond the control of these lovers of a wide world, functioned as the prairie called:

I am the plains, barren since time began,
 Yet do I dream of motherhood, when man
 One day at last shall look upon my charms
 And give me towns, like children, for my
 arms. 31

The call of the plains has been answered,

and with the fulfilling of its prosaic demands has passed a great deal of the romance of the prairie. The land is now dotted with dwellings of men who till their few acres, willingly abide by the law of the land, and seemingly have no urge to move on to a place where life is wild and free. There are growing cities and railroads and other signs of progress. The West has become a civilized world; but its spirit has not wholly departed. The night-sky and the stars are still the same, the land is yet young, and poets continue to write:

underneath there pulses strong

The Current of the Infinite. 32

Perhaps the spirit of the land has always been progress. The far visions and direct inspiration men received in earlier times may have been needed in order to build the foundation for the future

31. Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 58.

32. "To a Brown Prairie" by Stella P. Baisch. (Author's manuscript).

progress of the West. The men of the prairie, since then, have continued to work untiringly to complete the structure, and the spirit of the land has kept alive to urge them on.

It seems as though the next step in the progress of the West is to be the growth of a literature. With the cessation of the strenuous battle with the land, life on the prairie is allowed a fuller, richer development, and the growth of a literature is the natural outcome. Perhaps these airy, breezy verses pulsing with the spirit of the land are its beginning. If spirit, a love for the land, and thrilling episodes of big, true-hearted heroes add to the glory of a literature, the West has given its writers a rich heritage.

Chapter III

COWBOY BALLADS

Only recently have American people become interested in cowboy ballads. Several collections have now been made, and interest in them has grown. The songs have a peculiar charm because they sprang, not from the poetic genius of developed artists but from the big hearts of crude, uncultured men. They are spontaneous compositions with a decided 'unliterary quality'; but it is exactly this ruggedness, combined with the absolute genuineness of the sentiment, that gives them their charm. They are natural, elemental, and jingoistic; but they have a vigorous simplicity and directness. John A. Lomas, the American ballad-collector, calls them "raw collops slashed from the rump of nature".¹

The life of the cowboys naturally led to some such type of expression. They lived on isolated ranches; and the routine of their work consisted of lonely night watches and long days of herding on limitless plain, endless rounds of riding through the empty waste, and the tireless activity of spring round-ups and long drives up the trail to the shipping points. Only occasionally

1. "Collector's Note" in Cowboy Songs.

was this monotony relieved by the arrival of an Eastern tenderfoot, the death of a comrade, or the hanging of an outlaw. During these long years of grinding, wearing toil the cowboys were thrown on their own resources for entertainment, and they did what isolated people have always done. They gave their favorite tales, an elemental swinging rhythm and sang them. Most of the songs were composed by the cowboys themselves in their lonely hours on duty and sung by the composers in the evening when the ranchmen gathered together. The entire camp criticized and repolished them to fit cowboy standards. New stanzas were added and expressions changed. Thus many of the songs became a joint product of the members of the camp.

These men were extremely particular about the terminology of the songs; it had to be 'cowboy lingo'. No tenderfoot phrases were allowed to pass. Their finest emotional songs have this cowboy language. Their Heaven is the 'Blessed Range', the Judgment Day 'the Great Round-Up', and God 'The Boss of the Riders'; girls, even when spoken of with tenderness, are 'sagehens' and 'heifers'; sinners are 'strays' and 'maverick' and the sky is 'the unfenced blue'. Every song, to have the spontaneous

appeal that assured its success, must have this cowboy tang. And, if combined with the proper 'lingo' it had a contagious, intoxicating rhythm, its success was complete. The cowboys wanted these songs to fill them with a reckless, dare-devil spirit or to drown their loneliness in sentimentalism. They wanted relaxation from the grind, the strained monotony, of their lives; and the rhythmic swing of these songs gave them such a luxury of carefree irresponsibility. The galloping merry-go-round of rhythm---a natural outgrowth of the pent-up strain of cowboy life---seemed to fill them with the joy of existence---to make them drunk with life itself.

The cowboy manner of singing the ballads intensified the swing of the rhythm. Charles J. Finger^{gives} in a graphic description of the natural way of singing ballads. He says frontiersmen sing for the sheer love of exercise. They ornamented the melody with little trills and jerks, odd lengthening of occasional notes, long pauses, skippings, tremolos, and explosive accentuations. Mr. Finger says the best advice regarding the singing of these songs is, "Be careful to be careless".

Besides being a tonic for depressed spirits,

the songs are valuable for the light they throw on cowboy life and thought. The history of the West in the two decades following the Civil War is, undoubtedly, best told in these ballads---the natural products of the life there. Nowhere else have we such vivid, human pictures of the conditions of frontier life and of the cowboy himself---the unique, romantic figure of the West, whose winning artlessness left many happy memories. The West is the cowboy's world no more. With the coming of the despised wire fences he has moved on and left the taming of the plains to the determined settlers.

The ballads that have come down to us are the ones that pleased---those the cowboys continued to sing. They have stood the test of ranch-world criticism. John A. Lomax, who is ex-president of the American Folk-Lore Society and Fellow from Harvard for the collection of American Ballads, has been the chief figure to create a national interest in cowboy ballads. Mr. Lomax has had two collections published: Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp in 1919; and Cowboy Songs in 1925. About his last collection he says that in a few instances he

violated the ethics of a ballad-gatherer by selecting and putting together the best lines from different versions, all telling the same story. Most of the songs were taken from oral recitation, and only in a few instances could the authorship of any song be discovered. Mr. Lomas^x says, "They seem to have sprung up as quietly and mysteriously as the grass on the plains." 2

N. Howard Thorp, familiarly known to his cowboy comrades as Jack Thorp, has an interesting compilation of Songs of the Cowboys with an enlightening introduction by Alice Corbin Henderson. 'Jack' Thorp was a genuine cowboy puncher, who sold his collection of ballads at cow-camps, round-ups, and cattle-fairs. For each song in his collection Mr. Thorp gives the author if he is known, the time of composition, the manner of discovery, and the place in which it was first heard.

Besides the cowboy songs transmitted by purely oral tradition and later collected by the ballad-gatherers, there are many that were written by individual authors. These, if they were thought

worthy, were often reshaped and made more true to cowboy standards. William Lawrence Chittenden, James Barton Adams, H.H. Knibbs, and Elliott C. Lincoln seem to have been favorite ballad-makers. But above all these looms Badger Clark. After reading his verses, an old cowman said, "I don't know how he knowed, but he knows" ³

Mr. Clark is a man of the open. From his babyhood he has lived a pioneer life. When he was six months old, his mother, in the absence of his father and brothers, carried him on one arm while she plowed enough sod about the house to save it from a destructive prairie fire. Most of his boyhood was spent in the Black Hills of Dakota. Two summers he passed on a ranch in Wyoming and four years in a cow country in Arizona as overseer of a small ranch. To him the cattle country was a land of romance. In letters to his mother he expressed his over-wrought feelings in verse, and thus began his poetic career. Mr. Clark still lives in the Black Hills of Dakota---alone in a two-roomed cabin. He is forty-five years old, is unmarried, and is a well-behaved, law-abiding citizen, who is loved and respected by his countrymen. In spite of

3. Preface to Sun and Saddle Leather, p. VII.

poor health and a romantic temperament, he takes part in the general activities of the community and receives no particular attention, for which no one is more grateful than he. In a recent letter in answer to the writer's inquiry about his life Mr. Clark says, "I am not misanthropic, but my quiet years on the ranch taught me to enjoy solitude and robbed me of any ambition to become a social luminary. I could not for a moment consider living in a city, and even the continual social clatter and chatter of my own small town, in these days of easy communication and quick transportation, rather get on my nerves." Farther on in the letter he says, "I was in New York last fall, and gazed and marveled after the manner of hicks, yet on my way back I marveled more that so many Western writers should choose to live in that roaring super-corral. It's either economic necessity or sheer insanity!"

From this man of the open come true, ringing ballads that please the cowboy heart. They tell of the trail, of the 'God of the Open', of rangers, and riding like their very own poems.

There are many cowboy ballads. Next to the Negro collection, the cowboy songs make the largest

body of folk-lore in American literature. Alice Corbin Henderson says the conditions favoring the preservation of folk-songs are a communal unity of interest or occupation and a certain degree of isolation from the world of affairs and from continuous contact with printed sources. These conditions existed in the cowboy world, and the ballads have been preserved and will likely continue to live because they show the heart of a people.

To get the rich flavor of these simple homespun songs, we must turn to the songs themselves. In them we shall see the gracious 'knight-errant of the plain', who sings of his horse and his armor---saddle, lariat, spurs--- as did the old knights of romance. He sings, too, of his love, his friendship, his skirmishes, and his work. His songs are history wherein is shown every phase of the hero's life. See him gaily introduce himself:

Ho, I'm a jolly cowboy, from Texas now

I hail;

Give me my quirt and pony, I'm ready for
the trail.

I love the rolling prairies, they're free
from care and strife,

Behind a herd of longhorns, I'll journey
all my life. ⁴

And watch him swing lightly into his saddle after a
long night-watch under the stars:

In the east the great daylight is breaking,
And into my saddle I spring;
The cattle from sleep are awaking,
The heaven-thoughts from me take wing;
The eyes of my broncho are flashing,
Impatient he pulls at the reins,
And off round the world I go dashing,
A reckless cōboy of the plains. ⁵

Of his reckless, happy-go-lucky spirit
"Dan Taylor" is a good example:

Dan Taylor is a rollicking cuss,
A frisky son-of-a-gun;
He loves to court the maidens,
And he savies how it's done.

He used to be a cowboy,
And they say he wasn't slow;

4. "The Cowboy Spirit" in Songs of the Cowboys
compiled by N. Howard Thorp, p. 90.

5. "The Cowboy's Meditation" in Songs of the Cowboys
compiled by N. Howard Thorp, p. 46.

He could ride the bucking broncho
And swing the long lasso.⁶

Yet in spite of such flippant recklessness, there is a tender spot in his heart. In "The Clown's Baby" an actual child had been substituted for the lost 'property baby'. During the performance before the cowboys the baby laughed aloud. Note the result:

Oh, that baby laugh! It was echoed
From the benches with a ring,
And the roughest customer there sprang up
With, "Boys, its the real thing."
The ring was jammed in a minute
Not a man that did not strive
For a "shot at holding the baby",--
The baby that was alive---

After the show the men went home with faces a 'little sheepish' but 'strangely bright', and the 'bold-faced leader---the terror of the place' said:

He wasn't a bit afraid!
He's as game as he's good-looking!
Boys, that was a show that paid. ⁷

No wonder we love this reckless, strangely tender cowboy!

6. N. Howard Thorp's Songs of the Cowboys, p. 57.

7. Margaret Vandergrift: in Lomax's Songs of Cattle and Cow Camp, p. 40.

enthusiasm:

The bawl of a steer,
To a cowboy's ear,
Is music of sweetest strain;
And the yelping notes
of the gray coyotes
To him are a glad refrain.

And his jolly songs
Speed him along,
As he thinks of the little gal
With golden hair
Who is waiting there
At the bars of the home corral.

For a kingly crown
In a noisy town
His saddle he wouldn't change;
No life so free
As the life we see
Way out on the Yaso range. ⁹

The happy picture was very likely the impulse
of a moment, for occasionally, there are songs of

9. "The Cowboy's Life" attributed to James Barton Adams
in Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 20.

He's singin' to his dearie--
 Hee---Ya, tammalalleday!

Settle down, you cattle, till the mornin'.)

Nothin' out the hazy range that you folks need,
 Nothin' we kin see to take your eye.
 Yet we got to watch you or you'd all stampede,
 Plungin' down some royo bank to die.

(So--o, now, for still the shadows stay;

The moon is slow and steady;

The sun comes when he's ready.

Hee--ya, tammalalleday!

No use runnin' out to meet the mornin'.)¹¹

In N. Howard Thorp's collection is an interesting "Night-Herding Song".

Oh, slowup, dogies, quit your roving round,
 You have wondered and trampled all over the
 ground,

Oh, graze along, dogies, and feed kinda slow,
 And don't forever be on the go,--
 Oh, move slow, dogies, move slow.

.....

11. Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 68.

Of the actual round-ups, stampedes, and branding days there are no songs. The familiar love poem "Lasca" by Frank Desprez is one of the few attempts at a description of a stampede. Perhaps an exact description of such a complicated activity was too technical a problem for the minds of the cowboys to attack; and, perhaps, they wished to forget their work while they sang. Figures taken from these activities are not rare, though. These lines from "A Cowboy at the Carnival" are a good example of their type of description:

Never seed sich herds o' people throwed
together, every brand
O' humanity, I reckon, in this big mountain
land
Rounded up right here in Denver, runnin' on
new sort of feed;
Actin' restless and oneasy, like they
threatened to stampede. 16

There are many breezy, carefree riding songs. "Ridin", one of Badger Clark's first poems sent in a letter to his mother from the Arizona cow country, is perhaps, the breeziest. Only the refrains are quoted

below:

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'--

Desert ripplin' in the sun,
Mountains blue along the skyline---
I don't envy anyone
When I'm ridin'.

Just a-ridin', a-ridin'---

Splittin' long cracks through the air,
Stirrin' up a baby cyclone,
Rippin' up the prickly pear
As I'm ridin'.

Just a-ridin', a-ridin',

Who kin envy kings and czars
When the coyotes down the valley
Are a-singin' to the stars,
If he's ridin'? ¹⁷

Elliott C. Lincoln's "The June Trail" is another good example of the lazy, carefree spirit riding on the big range gave the cowboy:

Oh, it's good to be a-ridin'
On thru June without decidin'
Anythin'----jest trustin' luck.

Pinto hawse, pinto hawse,
 Don't yo' look to me for guidin'
 When yo' hear the saddle sing
 Kree-e-kuk, chuck-a, chuck. 18

"Pardners" tells why the cowboy's horse
 often became his dearest comrade.

For we have slept on the barren plains
 An' cuddled against the cold;
 We've been through tempests of drivin' rains
 When the heaviest thunder rolled;
 We've raced from fire on the lone prairie
 An' run from the mad stampede;
 An' there ain't no money could buy from me
 A pard of your style and breed. 19

Broncho-bustin' afforded the cowboys a
 great deal of pleasure. The descriptions of this
 pastime are especially graphic. "The Bronc That
 Wouldn't Bust"--

went so high above the earth
 Lights from Jerusalem shone.
 Right there we parted company
 And he came down alone.

18. Elliott C. Lincoln's Ranch Verses, p. 3.

19. Berton Braley; in Lomax's Songs of the Cattle
 Trail and Cow Camp, p. 100.

I hit terra firma
 The buckskin's heels struck free,
 And brought a bunch of stars along
 To dance in front of me. ²⁰

There are occasional songs of the cowboys' 'domestic' life. "Old Daugherty" seems to have been the important figure in the camp. He was usually not a pleasant, amiable sort; but he was keenly appreciated by the cowboys.

It was chuck-time on the round-up, and
 We heard Old Daugherty shout---

.....

The way we scrambled round that mess-box
 scramblin' for tools,
 Showed the disregard for ethics that is
 taught in other schools;
 But what we lacked in manners we made up
 in friendly strife,
 To see who'd get thru quickest with the
 stuff that prolongs life.²¹

Another cowboys describes meal time thus:

Then all thoughts were turned with reverence

20. Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 102.

21. "Chuck-Time on the Round-Up" by Austin Corcoran in Thorp's Songs of the Cowboys, p. 24.

To a plate of beef and beans,
 As we grazed on beef and biscuits
 Like yearlings on the range ²²

The "Bull Whacker" tells briefly of what their food consisted:

Now perhaps you'd like to know
 What we have to eat
 A little piece of bread
 And a little dirty meat,
 A little black coffee,
 And whiskey on the sly; ²³

Occasionally women in the camp made life unpleasant for the cowboys. The boss of the "Old Bar-G" had gone to France and left the superintendence of the ranch to his daughter. The cook was soon dismissed, and the new manager decided to be cook also.

Wish't you'd seen her openin' meal
 Down on the Ol' Bar-G.
 We all blinked twict--seemed plumb unreal
 Down on the Ol' Bar-G.
 We had figs an' fudge an' whipped-up ~~pu~~-in
 An' angel-cake all dipped in goo-in

22. "A Cow Camp on the Range" in Thorp's Songs of the Cowboys, p. 30.

23. Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 69.

They unanimously decided to leave,

For out on the range we could chew an' cuss
An' git real mean an' bois-ter-uss,

Whar apron-strings they couln't rope us,

Down on the Ol' Bar-G. 24

"Thanksgiving on the Ranch" by James Barton
Adams is a camp discussion that is almost too rich
to omit. Because the owner was 'religious', the
cowboys were not working on Thanksgiving Day. During
their leisure time they began discussing the origin of
the day. Texas Tony thought

it was a celebration that was started
on the dock

When the Scribes and Pharisees was landed
onto Plymouth Rock.

Broncho Billy was sure 'Tex had got the stories mixed'
That the day, if he remembered, was a day
of jubilee

In remembrance of Abe Lincoln settin' all
the niggers free.

There were various other ideas given, but

Lengthy Jones an' Watt McGovern an' the
Rio Grandy Kid

Coincided in believin', as the present
writer did,

24. "Down on the Ol' Bar-G" by Phil LeNoir; in Thorp's
Songs of the Cowboys, p. 60.

It was just a yearly epoch to remind us

o' the day

When Columbus happened on us in a on-

expected way. 25

In the earlier days ranch life was not without occasional excitement. There were visiting scouts and outlaws; chief among those eulogized in cowboy songs are Buffalo Bill and Jesse James. But more exciting than these were the Indians. In the songs are several battle scenes, which show the cowboy a brave, fiery, persistent fighter.

While taking refreshments we heard a low yell,
The whoop of Sioux Indians coming up from the
dell;

We sprang to our rifles with a flash in each
eye.

"Boys", says our brave leader, "We'll fight
till we die."

They made a bold dash and came near to our
train

And the arrows fell round us like hail and
like rain,

But with our long rifles we fed them cold lead

Till many a brave warrior around us lay dead.

We shot their bold chief at the head of his
band

He died like a warrior with a gun' in his hand.

When they saw their bold chief lying dead in
his gore

They whooped and they yelled and we saw them
no more 26

Dances and pay-day carousals seem to have been the chief recreations. In these times of total relaxation the cowboy gave free rein to his long pent-up emotions. On pay-day he spent his money lavishly--- for drink or anything else that the town at the end of the trail afforded. The dance songs show a perfect frenzy of jollity. "The Cowboy's Christmas Ball" is a good example of their whirling rhythm.

The dust riz fast an' furious, we all just
galloped 'round

Till the scenery got so giddy, that Z Bar
Dick was downed.

We buckled to our partners, an' told 'em
to hold on,

Then shook our hoofs like lightning,
 until the early dawn.
 Don't tell me about catillious, or
 Germans, no sir 'ee!
 That whirl at Anson City just takes
 the cake with me.
 I'm sick of lazy shufflins, of them
 I've had my fill,
 Give me a frontier breakdown, backed
 up by Windy Bill. ²⁷

A typical dance call is found in James Barton Adams's
 "A Dance on the Ranch"

 All Set!

S'lute yer pardners! Let 'er go!
 Balance all an' do-ce-do!
 Swing yer girls an' run away!

Right an' left and gents sashay! ²⁸

And so the call continues for a page or two.

Their love songs are very frank expressions.

Oh, I sometimes think I'm locoed
 An' jes fit for herdin' sheep,
 'Cause I only think of Susie

27. William Lawrence Chittenden's Ranch Verses, p. 16.

28. Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p.117.

When I'm wakin' or I'm 'sleep.
 I'm wearin' Cupid's hobbles,
 An' I'm tied to Love's stake-pin;
 An' when my heart was branded,
 The irons sunk deep in.²⁹

Undoubtedly the best of their songs---the ones most popular with the cowboys themselves---were songs of pathos---of mothers, sisters, sweethearts, comrades, religion, and death. The cowboys had no home life. Many of them had left home ungraciously: and in the long, lonely days and nights they had much time to regret it. The pathetic songs touched them; they wept and were not ashamed. It was another way of giving vent to their emotions. There are many songs of dying cowboys who beg for messages to be sent to their loved ones at home; and who with their last breath warn comrades to cease their evil living and return home. "The Dying Cowboy" was a general favorite. It has nineteen stanzas in which the cowboy begs piteously 'not to' be buried on the lone prairie'; but there was nothing else to do.

29. "A Cowboy's Love Song" in Lomax's Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 65.

Yes, we buried him there on the lone prairie
 Where the owl all night hoots mournfully,
 Where the blizzard beats and the wind blows free
 O'er his lowly grave on the lone prairie.

And the cowboys now as they roam the plains,
 For they marked the spot where his bones were lain,
 Fling a handful of roses o'er his grave
 With a prayer to Him Who his soul will save.³⁰

Another very popular song was "The Cowboy's Lament".
 The refrain is:

Oh, beat the drum lowly and play the fife slowly,
 And beat the dead march as they carry me along;
 Take me to the graveyard and lay the sod o'er me
 For I'm a young cowboy and I know I've done wrong.

And the last stanza:

"Go bring me a cup, a cup of cold water,
 To cool my parched lips", the cowboy said;
 Before I returned the spirit had left him
 And gone to its Giver, the cowboy was dead.³¹

Their religious songs are, perhaps, more numerous than any other particular type. The big world and the night stars seem to have had a magic

30. Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 3.

31. " " " , p. 74.

effect on the soft-hearted cowboy. He often wonders about the "Final Round-Up", about his reception there, and the possible reunions with his mother. He even claims a long Scriptural ancestry for his calling.

Abraham emigrated in search of a range,
And when water was scarce he wanted a change,
Old Isaac owned cattle in charge of Esau
And Jacob punched cows for his father-in-law.

He started in business way down at bed rock,
And made quite a streak at handling stock;
Then David went from night-herding to using a
sling;
And, winning the battle he became a great king.
Then the shepherds, while herding the sheep on
a hill

Got a message from heaven of peace and good will.³²

But these excerpts are more typical of their religious songs:

Yet I trust in the last great round-up
When the rider shall cut the big herd,
That the cowboy shall be represented

32. "The Cowboy" in Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 96.

In the earmarks and brand of the Lord,
 To be shipped to the bright, mystic regions
 Over there in green pastures to lie,
 And led by the crystal still waters
 In the home of the sweet by-and-by 33

There's a heap of stock that's lowing now
 Around the Master's pen
 And feeding at his fodder stock
 Will have the brand picked then.
 And brands that when the hair was long
 Looked like the letter C
 Will prove to be the Devil's
 And the brand the letter D.

While many a long-haired coaster,--
 I mean just so to speak,
 That hasn't had the advantage
 Of the range and gospel creek
 Will get to crop the grasses
 In the pasture of the Lord
 If the letter C showed up
 Beneath the devil's checkerboard. 34

33. "The Great Round-Up" in Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 282.

34. "The Cowboy in Church" in Lomax's Cowboy Songs, p. 246.

In the songs more recently composed are many hints of regret that their day had passed. They hated the progress that had come into the West---especially the fences and railroads--because it robbed them of their occupation. Bronc Peeler sings:

I hate to see the wire fence
 A-closin' up the range;
 And all this filling in the trail
 With people that is strange.
 We fellers don't know how to plough
 Nor reap the golden grain;
 But to round up steers and brand the cows
 To us was allus plain³⁵

"The Railroad Corral" ends hopelessly:

But the longest day must reach evening at last,
 The hills are all climbed, the creeks all past;
 The tired herd droops in the yellowing light;
 Let them loaf if they will, for the railroad's
 in sight.³⁶

Such a body of folk lore the cowboys have left us. Time will determine its worth, but the

35. "BroncPeeler's Song" in Thorp's Songs of the Cowboys, p. 11.

36. Thorp's Songs of the Cowboys, p. 132.

cowboy himself will always be to the American people a romantic, lovable figure who has passed on.

The cowboys and the longhorns
Who partnered in eighty-four
Have gone to their last great round-up
Over on the other shore. 37

37. "The Last Longhorn" in Lomax's Cowboy Songs.

Chapter IV

POEMS ON PRAIRIE LIFE

Until the coming of the settlers the population of the prairie was a shifting one. Roaming tribes of Indians once put up their tepees along the streams, hunted the game in the vicinity, and from behind cover shot down the white men who drifted into sight. They fought desperately to save their hunting grounds from the white invaders; but a relentless government sent the tribes farther west, and the few stragglers who remained were killed, adopted by the whites, or gradually slunk away. Then the prairie became a cattle land, and on the wide unfenced ranges cowboys rode endlessly over sagebrushed hills and through hot stretches of sand. At night they slept with their herds under the stars to weird music furnished by yelping coyotes and hooting prairie owls. Then came--

barbed wire!

It broke the free range, sent the cowman west,
Cowboys in dimmer distance, riding, riding
Into rich sunset light whence lingering notes
Drift over dusky distances of trail! ¹

1. "Barbed Wire" in Edwin Ford Piper's Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 13.

Besides Indians and cowboys, there were scouts, men and women outlaws, traders, and forty-niners who drifted about on the prairie or passed through it and thus added to the thrill of its history. But these, too, went when the settlers came and robbed the prairie of a great deal of its romance. Life on the plains began to grow prosaic. The joys of the beginning of settlement---the long move westward, camping by the roadside in a vast, endless world, building a picturesque sod shanty, and starting a new home in a heretofore romantic land---were, often, too soon forgotten in a grim realistic fight for bare life---a fight made desperate by the fearful lurking idea that it might be a losing one. The strenuous, grinding toil under a seemingly pitiless Providence was depressing, soul-deadening. Drouths, floods, grasshoppers, and chinch-bugs came and devastated the land, destroying every possible effect of the strained, unceasing labor. Those who could went back to their homes in the east; some received help; and others starved in the wilderness. Through suffering, strain, and overwork men became brutal, feelingless. Women were crazed by the awful loneliness and barrenness and became lifeless, slovenly, and shrewish. Children grew big-eyed and wondered what

life held for them, and what the world outside of this stretch of land was like. The tales in their histories and geographies they scarcely dreamed of taking for the truth, and those told them by their fathers and mothers of times 'back east' were almost as unbelievable. Life was too big and strange for them. Work was the only reality, and they did too much of it and grew old before their time.

Necessarily the emphasis in frontier life was almost entirely physical. Life became a fight for bread---usually not for one or two, but for a fast-increasing family. Naturally this strenuous physical struggle was destructive to idealism, to appreciation of finer things. The settlers were engrossed by a materialism which yet persistently hangs on to prairie people, and will continue to do so until the fruit of the land can be extracted with less labor.

For this extreme practicality the plainsmen have been much satirized in modern literature---more in fiction than in poetry. In fact, not much poetry has been written about prairie life until very recently. In a new land a literature must

have time to grow out of the life there, and men must first succeed in wresting support from the wilderness before they can actually begin to live---to build up the social life out of which literature grows. The first pioneers conquered the land; their hands and minds were busy with the tasks that had to be done. But now a more leisurely time has come to the West, and poets are allowed the free use of their gifts. As a result, the body of prairie poetry is rapidly growing. The poets, like the contemporary novelists; have begun to picture Western life; and many of them do it as ~~but~~ bitterly and realistically. There are, however, a few poets yet remaining who have been inspired by the land itself---men who learned to love the land as they battled with it. It is from [#]such poets that we get sympathetic, appreciative pictures of early life on the plains.

Edwin Ford Piper, the chief poet of frontier life, is not a satirist at all, but a man whose understanding heart is full of keen sympathy for the strong men who fought with the wilderness. His parents came west in the wake of the early pioneers; and the poet was born

in Auburn, Nebraska, February 8, 1871. The family was engaged in farming and stock raising and was so successful in the cattle business that need of more grazing ground kept them continually moving westward with the herd and the covered wagon. The boy himself practically grew up in the saddle.

Range life did not keep him from school, though, as it did many others. In 1900 he received his A.M. from the University of Nebraska and became an instructor in English in that school. After two years he went to Harvard and in 1905 began teaching in the University of Iowa, where he is yet. From 1898 to 1902 he was one of the editors of The Kiote, a literary magazine published in Lincoln, Nebraska. Among his chief interests are pioneer life and folk-lore of the Middle West. The "Barbed Wire" country, which is the setting of his poetry, is Nebraska as it was in the early eighties.

Mr. Piper is not a grim realist. He believes that underneath the roughness, the uncouthness of the pioneer exterior, the finer feelings were kept alive. Perhaps his own life proves his belief. His soul was not deadened, but developed by the life on the plains and he did not fail to see a

of romance in the toil and loneliness. In his unornamented pictures of the country, the life, and the homely little incidents one can feel a kindly, appreciative spirit. His poems are a sort of epical record of the gradual filling up of the prairie. He pictures the immigrants, the coming of civilization, the going of the cowboys, and the joys and sorrows in the lives of the settlers. For this frontier chronicle he chooses significant, typical incidents and saturates their description with the peculiar flavor of the region. The native tang is rarely missing, and sympathy never is. In his unhappy pictures is no hint of bitterness nor cynicism. He understands and loves the people of whom he writes.

The form of Mr. Piper's verse has been criticized much more than the spirit or content. Most of his poems are narrative---a very condensed narrative. A good example of this extreme condensation is "Custos Musaruni".

Judge said she must go in---

She's a good looker.

They took the kid away---

If she was only---

I got a modern home.

Keep a baby in her arms, raise boosters---

Well, I'm a little old.

Better quit

Thinkin'

Low down family.

We can't have folks like that a-runnin loose.²

Nelson Antrim Crawford says Mr. Piper's verses lack spritual intensity---that his rhythmic patterns sre too restricted for his subject, and the result is a slight awkwardness in the handling of his verse. Mr. Crawford thinks an increased sureness, a willingness ~~to~~ be swept on by strong currents, would help Mr. Piper.³ Mary Austin says his poems have the native gesture but fail in lyric spring. She says his verse seldom 'lets its\elf out!'.⁴

Mr. Piper is also a lecturer of some note. Audiences delight especially in hearing him read his own poems. Louise Townsend Nicholl, the editor

2. Paintrock Road, p. 83.

3. Poetry, 131:91-4, Nov. 1927.

4. Southwest Review, 424:255-258, Winter, 1928.

of The Measure, says: "Epics (and that is what his poems really are---epics of the builders and trampers of the Middle West) should be read just as he reads them....gravely, almost drawlingly, so that no part of the humor and monotony and the sadness and vigor of his themes shall be lost, and with bits of chanting song woven in---bits which come as suddenly and inevitably as the rhythm of a brook or a galloping horse's feet. With his words and his voice he creates something new from something old, something hauntingly lovely, magically stirring from things which seem to other than poets dull and flat. Mr. Piper has caught the melody, the cadence of the Middle West".⁵

There are many poets who occasionally write on prairie life, but none who give it such entire attention as does Mr. Piper. C.L. Edson has a little volume entitled Prairie Fire in which he attempts a yet larger task than Mr. Piper undertook---"To cover the entire history of the prairie from the coming of the white people

5. The Measure, New York City, Oct. 7, 1921.

down to the reconciliation after the close of the Sectional War." ⁶ Mr. Edson's verses are not chiefly concerned with the homely, everyday incidents of pioneer life, but rather with the national sectional interests. Many of his poems deal with the days preceding the Civil War. He has, however, some very realistic pictures of home life. There is more bitterness and less appreciation in his verses than in Mr. Piper's.

There is scarcely a phase of early prairie life that has not been pictured by contemporary poets. It seems, though, that they have shied from attempting descriptions of Indian life except by transcriptions of Indian poetry. Perhaps the life of the red men does not admit of the realistic treatment so popular today. Even C.L. Edson in his panoramic history has no description of an Indian attack. The best Indian picture I have been able to find is "The Painted God" by May KcKee, written in honor of Sitting Bull, the chief in the fight against Custer. The poem shows the Indians' hatred of the White men and their right

to hate.

I am a Sioux!

My fathers were the rulers of Dakotah;

The Pale Faces have made their children slaves!

The White man came for Gold!

We did not want him!

He took our lands.

We did not wish to fight!

But were we squaws?

Refuse protection of our homes? Our country?

He saw not the lustre of the sunset;

He saw Gold

He heeded not the frenzied winds--the passion
tears of heaven;

He scorned the bleeding hills--the death-cry
of the pines;

Laughed at their wounds--mocked at their agony;

He wanted Gold!

Did he keep peace? His treaties?

No! He wanted Gold!

What law have I broken?

Is it wrong for me to love my own?

Is it wicked in me because my skin is red?

Because I am a Sioux?

Because I was born where my fathers lived?

Because I would die for my people and my country?

They tell you I murdered Custer.

It is a lie!

His eyes were blinded and he could not see.

He was a fool and he rode to death.

He made a fight, not I.

Whoever tells you I killed the Yellow Hair is
a liar!

I want only this remembered.

I was the last man of my tribe to give up my
rifle.

I have spoken. 7

The outlaws, whose names seem to have been bywords among the prairie dwellers, have received due attention in the poetry of the West. N. Howard Thorp lists the most notorious women outlaws in a ballad.

There's a touch of human pathos

A glamour of the West,

Round the names of women outlaws

Who have now gone to their rest---

Broncho Sue, Belle Star, and Shudders,
 Pike Kate, and Altar Doane,
 Calamity Jane, Sister Cummings,
 And the Rose of Cimmaron.⁸

Among the other transient prairie folk
 immortalized in song, was the 'pilgrim crew' on
 the Oregon Trail.

Desert suns and throats o' dust,
 But we never stop;
 Woman-folks are knittin' as they ride.⁹

Camping, the coffee pot, and bacon were important
 poetical items in the songs of these Oregon Trail
 pilgrims.

Dear loving-cup of out-o'-doors,
 And history in every spot
 Has battered you, old coffee pot.
 Oh, black Pandora-box of dreams!¹⁰

As the preceding chapter tells, the cowboy
 sang his own songs and then disappeared and left his
 range to the incoming settlers.

8. "Women Outlaws" in Songs of the Cowboys, p. 170.

9. "On the Oregon Trail" in Badger Clark's Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 156.

10. "The Old Camp Coffee-Pot" in *ibid*, p. 185.

Historians have written much of the days of settlement but have rarely taken pains to portray the details of the actual everyday life of the homesteaders. Histories are chiefly objective, and life is not. Poets have entered the hearts of people and felt with them. They know what little homely incidents mean in the lives of lonely people; and because they do, they write truer^x history---a sort of soul-history. By suggestive, thought-stirring pictures the Western poets have attempted to give us such a sketch of pioneer life. Not the humanness of Edwin Ford Piper's picture of "The Movers"

Westward creeps

The jolting prairie schooner and its wheels
Talk on the axle while the sweating bays
Draw sturdily, nodding their patient heads.
Humped on his spring seat 'neath the canvas roof,
The bearded, weather-beaten driver guides
With slackened line. An eager boy and girl--
The lass with yellow curls, the lad well tanned--
Peer close beside him. From the hidden depths
Comes the low crooning of a lullaby.¹¹

11. Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 1.

What does the wilderness hold for this eager,
 lovable family? C.L. Edson in Prairie Fire
 has several poems on the family life of the early
 homesteaders---of men bringing young brides to
 wilt away in the desert. His pictures are
 depressingly pathetic---women crazed by loneliness,
 men desperate with hopelessness, and babies born
 into hovels to such hopeless, crazed parents.
 Edwin Ford Piper's pictures are more cheerful, for
 always

love strode in to lighten evil days,
 And souls grew large with human sympathy.¹²

He gives us tragedies, too, but his men live and
 work. They build homes, dig wells, and break sod.
 The wagon rattles in the frosty air
 Along the level prairie road that swings
 To the low, dark bulk whereon the sodded roof
 Bristles with meager, winter-beaten weeds.
 Before it, ranks of whip-like trees stand guard;
 Behind lie cribs, straw sheds, the well, the
 woodpile,
 And the garden square fenced in by a gooseberry
 hedge
 From weathering stalk and stubble.¹³

12. "The Neighborhood" in Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p.78.

13. "The Sod House" in Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p.22.

and

the sweating bays plod on,
And that black ribbon at the ploughtail rolls
Beside its drier neighbor. 14

But this pleasant home-building time did
not last. Calamities came thronging upon the
settlers. During the crop-growing season came
"The Drought".

The light of noon comes reddened from a sky
A-blur with dust; the irritable wind
Burns on your cheek, and leans against your
garments
Like a hot iron.

.....

The sun glares,
The wind drones and makes dirty all the sky.
The horses scarcely fight the vicious flies.
This is departure, but there are who stay. 15

and then "The Grasshoppers":

that clinging, hopping horde
Made the earth crawl. With slobbery mouths,
All leafage, woody twig, and grain, and grass,
They utterly consumed, leaving the land abominable.

14. "Breaking Sod" in Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 21.

15. Edwin Ford Piper's Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 24.

It is a relief to find that those who
lived through such times were able to be happy
afterwards. Hope yet remained; they began the
struggle anew. Soon we hear again:

the click of guard and sickle and the
flails that turn again,
And drover's shout, and snap of whips and
creak of horses' tugs. 19
and see

the cultivator-shovels are a 'goingin'
through the dirt.

.....

And then an apron waving nearly half a mile away,
It's dinner time, I think there'll be some
rhubarb-pie today. 20

In April comes

Seed time and weed time and cattle out to grass,
Women-folk a-settin' hens and plantin' garden sasse. 21

19. "The Promise of Bread" by C.L. Edson in Willard
Wattles's Sunflowers, p. 60.

20. "Plowing Corn in Kansas" in Willard Wattles's
Sunflowers, p. 78.

21. "The Neighborhood" in Willard Wattles's Sunflowers,
p. 115.

People are not wont to be unhappy while they work, and thus the pioneers soon grew more eager and light of heart. With the renewed hope came a spirit of sociability. Men wanted human contacts. Their hearts yearned for friendly fellowship. Often families drove miles and miles over the prairie in farm wagons to visit their nearest neighbors, and then

Fellowship

Budded and blossomed into a school-church. 22

Schools, churches, and villages sprang up. They became chiefly visiting centers, and through them the social spirit grew. There were "literaries", basket suppers, Fourth of July picnics, play parties; and not the least of the social gatherings was "Butchering Day".

The phases of this development have been graphically described by the poets. Edwin Ford Piper's pictures are again the most lifelike and the most numerous. At the church

Women alight and enter, while the men

Tie sweating teams to the much gnawed hitching
posts.

22. "The Neighborhood" in Piper's Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 76.

Come clattering to stow head-gear on the hooks
 Above the baskets, tiptoe to the seats,
 Sing, hear the Bible, fall to study fast.
 Jimmie's worn shoes must dangle in mid-air
 As he prints with pride old news about the cat;
 Here dark curls with red ribbons shake and bob
 As Susie struggles with her fraction sums;
 Here Philip's mouth is grim as he tears apart
 Some tough old sentence, settling word and word
 On the painful diagram. Here Johnnie sits
 Enraptured with the animals and trees,
 Cities and ships and wondrous waterfalls
 Of the big geography, while up in front
 A class drones heavily through Paul Revere.²⁴

The picture is not unlike the prairie schools of
 today. The time spent in that little sod school-
 house was evidently a pleasant one, for the
 'schoolmistress' went away with happy memories.

The towns in pioneer days were bare,
 unsightly places. Often they were merely 'straggling
 streets', where farmers' teams stamped drowsily at
 flies! But when they were frequented by troublesome
 stragglers of by-gone-days---'strutters whose combs

24. "The Schoolmistress" in Barbed Wire and Other
 Poems, p. 34.

demanding cutting' ²⁵--they became more than that. And in the fall when people came miles and miles 'to stock up for the winter', these barren little villages became gossiping centers, too.

Box suppers were frequent gatherings in pioneer days. Mr. Piper gives a lively description of one in a poem entitled "Karicko". The church needed paint and a new shingle roof, and the money was to be raised by the sale of the baskets the ladies had brought. The whole neighborhood was there.

In front the older gossipry.

----- and farther back

Colorful boys and girls.

While

bass and treble

Are rivalling in rich and rolling laughter, ²⁶

the auctioneer mysteriously unwraps and assort s the baskets, and then begins in an oratorical voice pleading with the bidders for 'the Half! the quarter! fifty cents! ' And with that evening's events began Karicko's love tale.

25. "Joe Taylor" in Piper's Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 100.

26. Paintrock Road, p. 46.

Early "literaries" were supported by two classes of people---those who wanted amusement and those who actually longed for literary development. In pioneer times they were conducted chiefly by the ambitious, enterprising group; and through them the community often discovered its leaders. Piper has a lifelike description of one of these gatherings. Mrs. Dwiggins urged its organization; and Pettigrew, whose "bony face" was as steeped in sourness

As if his soul were lined with colic-cramp, "Helped by objecting". The woman won; her husband was elected president and delivered an oratorical inaugural address, which won great applause even though "many hinted that a woman wrote it for him." The rest of the program Piper describes thus:

two sisters sang;

Their voices overflowed the little room,
The bell-like alto lifting hopeless grief
Till many eyes had tears. Next, children spoke
Breitmann and Carleton ballads.

A recess

Young lads rushed out for moonlit pullaway;
The organ drew the singers: Vacant Choir,

The Little Old Sod Shanty, Billy Boy,
Tenting To-Night, Sweet Afton, Rosy Nell,
 And Rocking on the Billows had their turns;
 Then business meeting.²⁷

Play parties were very popular. Recently the Folk-lore Society has made various collections of the play-party songs of different sections of the Middle West, and has discovered that there is little variation in the songs that were used in different localities. The play parties were sanctioned by ministers and conscientious parents who strenuously objected to the dance. They were much simpler---much less trouble; no preparation was necessary, for the games were practically the same each time and were usually played outdoors in the moonlight. Mr. Piper has an interesting picture of the young people who came.

Nell Davis trips in first,
 A lively blonde with nose tip-tilted; clumps
 In her tow a bashful youth whose shiny face
 Displays its freckles as gooseberry jam
 Makes show of seeds; Now enters Arabella,
 The cowgirl who can conquer a wild pony;

27. "Mister Dwiggins" in Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 88.

Sam Biolet, conscious of his first mustache,
 With him his sisters, Ella, Jessie, just
 Arrived last week from Elgin, Illinois,
 Ready of laugh and work; three giantesses,
 Blonde, tanned, the Andersons; they till the
 fields,

Having no brothers,
 The list continues until

The house
 Grows crowded, guests move to the moonlit grass,
 Where laughters rise, and merry voices chat in
 lively melody.

Joe Lawrence calls,
 "Your partners! Form the lines for Old Brass
Wagon".

Besides Old Brass Wagon they play other "weaving-
 shuttling" games---Down in Alabama, Happy Miller,
We're Marching Round the Fence; and

The moon is rolling half-way down the sky
 When the last wagon rumbles to the road;²⁸

Children play a reasonably important part
 in the poetry of the prairie. We see them peering
 wonderingly from covered wagons, tripping happily

28. "The Party" in Barbed Wire and Other Poems, p. 105.

to school with dangling dinner-pails, hoeing sunflowers in the corn, straddling the gentle 'family horse', carrying water-jugs, and throwing clods at gophers. Hunting was a favorite pastime of the young pioneers. Selden Lincoln Whitcomb in his Poem "Jackrabbits of Dakota" has given us a picture of one of these small hunters in his native haunt:

Catiously the settler's boy
 Creeps in the cornfield,
 With his gun all ready.
 Soon he sinks, aims with care---
 A sudden flash and then report
 Over the vast, unfenced prairie.
 Over the brown grasses of late November,
 Leaps a figur, white as falling snow,
 Into the distance. 29

Life on the prairie now is not entirely different from that pictured by Edwin Ford Piper. The extremely hard times have passed, sod shanties have disappeared, and there are more trees and less loneliness.

And yet most of our modern poets seemingly fail
to see the

subtler beauty underneath
the ugliness.³⁰

Willard Wattles at times has a decided 'prairie feeling', a 'pulling at his heart-strings'; and there are others who do. But more of them persist in stressing the lack of idealism and the materialism of the prairie people. They show picture after picture of tired, sweating men toiling incessantly under a mercilessly hot sun, mothers broken down by toil and child-bearing, slatternly lifeless drudges, self-satisfied ignorance, suppressed childhood, and big barns and little houses. They make the life of the prairie people consist of their toil and its consequent getting of money, more land, cows, and horses. J.G. Sigmund in "Loam Bound" gives us the modern poets' idea of the plainsman's philosophy:

"The house can wait; the barn comes first" he said,
"A barn will build a house but houses won't
Bring livestock that will pay for building barns".

30. "Harry Kemp" in Willard Wattles's Sunflowers, p. 160.

They belt the steam engine that's wheezing and
chugging---

And pitchforks are gleaming and laborers laugh,
Preparing to hurry the wheat from the chaff.

.....

While creaking and turning and slapping and
churning,

The belted red thresher has lisped out its
yearning---

Has mumbled its hunger in mournfullest note,
And the first sheaf is ground in its ravenous
throat. 34

This picture is unlike anything in Edwin Ford Piper's works, for gangs of men toiling with tugging machines were more rare then. Walt ~~Molson~~ says the only farm machinery that we yet need is "a contraption that will teach the calves to drink". 35

In the unceasing toil which the prairie demands of its people, even Willard Wattles fails to see any poetry.

You'd like to kill the poet who slops
over at the mouth

When the gentle August zephyrs come hell-

blazing from the south;

34. "Threshing Time" in Willard Wattles's Sunflowers, p. 132.

35. "Farm Machinery" in Willard Wattles's Sunflowers, p. 87.

You'd like to set him pumping when the wind-
mill wheel is dead
And you have to furnish water for your thirstiest
hundred head;
When you sluice your heaving porkers with cold
water all day long
You could massacre the minstrel who would set
the thing in song. 36

The pictures of contemporary home life on the prairie are, it seems to me, rather one-sided and unfair. There are homes where people live in filth and barrenness, in self-satisfied ignorance, and in absolute drudgery; but such homes are hardly typical except in the Russian settlements. There are, perhaps, as many homes in which the inmates are wide-awake, intelligent, ambitious people, who think and act and feel as other men do. Below there are several of the gloomy home scenes sketched by contemporary poets.

A mother many times, again her hour has come
To endure travail, to add a child
To that bare household, where a crowding brood
Content for primal needs.

36. "Harry Kemp" in Willard Wattles's *Sunflowers*, p. 158.

The doctor faces his grim work alone,
Ready to match his kindly care, the skill
Won through long years of work
Against life's mystery of birth.

No white-capped nurse is there, no shining
 surgical device;
Only a low, hard bed of straw, worn quilts,
The sputter of a coal oil lamp. 37

Nell Lewis Woods makes the picture more bitter yet. "The Man" had loved Agnes, who married another. Since then twenty years had passed, and he had not seen her. Now he thinks ~~the~~ loves Lorain, but to be certain of it, he must get a glimpse of Agnes.

I knocked at the back door:--

A slattern opened it;

Filthy dress, scraggly hair, feet in old
over shoes;

.....

In a flash I knew Lorain had no rival!

Agnes did not recognize me; so I inquired

the way to the nearest section line road,

And swiftly left;

Freed of a love hang-over of twenty years.

37. "The Country Doctor" by Perle DeVol Evans in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 57.

This is what the woman said:

He came today; thank God he did not know me;
It was butchering time, and I was cleaning
hog guts

For sausage casings.

I am a broken toothed hog at thirty-eight. 38

Helen Rhoda Hoopes's home scene in "The Winter
Twilight on the Victory Highway" is not unhappy;
but note the smug self-satisfaction:

So busy is every living creature
In the little house and in the big barn
That not one of them cares a flip about Jorgen,
Or the marriage problem,
Or life at Deanville,
Or the tendencies of modern fiction,
Or "Sweeney among the nightingales".
Nor would they care even if they knew about
such tiresome things,
For here at home,
New things are always going to happen,
Really intoxicating things,
They are going to get a new car, maybe, and a
washing machine;
And Lady will have another Jersey calf.

38. "Who Does Not Love" in Helen Rhoda Hoopes's
Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 152.

Soon they will have to move the old baby into
the crib!

And make the cradle ready for the new baby.

They will plow the west seven acres, and get
more stock;

They will buy new dishes, and a rug for the
front room,

And get a loud speaker. 39

The happy, cheerful pictures of people with
life and vision are not so numerous, but there are
some. Vachel Lindsay in his tour through the West
saw not only 'little houses and big barns' but real
men.

Into the acres of the newborn state
He poured his strength, and plowed his ancient
name,

And, when the traders followed him, he stood
Towering above their furtive souls and tame.

That brow without a stain, that fearless eye
Oft left the passing stranger wondering,
To find such knighthood in a sprawling land,
To see a democrat well-nigh a king. 40

39. Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 66.

40. "The Proud Farmer" in General William Booth, p. 111.

Annie Pike Greenwood, who is the mother of four children and was for fourteen years an Idaho ranchman's wife, shows that the toil the prairie demands does not take all the poetry out of life. In "The Farmer's Wife and Her Poem" she gives her "excuse for not being famous".

When I was young I used to write, and so I
shall again,---

(But I must start the fire at once for
dinner for the men.)

I'll write about last night: the clouds were
billowing up the sky

(I cannot get the oven hot enough to bake
this pie)

The moon was like a wistful bride, so tender
and so true,---

(These biscuits will be just the thing to
serve with chicken stew.)

As though the aisle of clouds she went, her
veil a floating mist--

(Barbed wire, Joe? Don't cry, my boy; I'll
iodine your wrist.) 41

So the poem continues. The work wins the race, but she still plans to finish the poem sometime. Perhaps

prairie life as a whole is such a race; and work is winning because it must be done, but underneath, the poetic vision and dreams of finer things remain keenly alive. And perhaps those who are answering the prairie's demands---who "work to get the world a breakfast"⁴²---will some day receive due attention, even in poetry, for thus faithfully performing their part of life's demands. Poets will sometime again see "The subtler beauty underneath the ugliness"⁴³ and do for contemporary prairie life what Piper has done for the pioneer life. The prairie is yet in a stage of progress and in its unfolding will continue to open new vistas to eager poets. In a sketch of the evolution of the prairie J.C. Lindberg reviews life on the plains and exultantly prophesies "A Better Day".

I AM THE PRAIRIE SINGER

I am the Prairie Singer--
 The ghost of the days that were;
 I am the voice of the long-forgotten past,
 I am the cry since time began.

42. A Pamphlet, This My Song.

43. Ibid, 30.

I sing the chaos before creation^{was}
 When mists blew vagrantly across the deep;
 Primordial life whose fossil prints remain,
 Uncovered from ten thousand years of sleep.

Primeval days I sing, when dinosaurs
 And wilder beasts fought for supremacy--
 When glaciers, like slow, creeping monsters, crawled
 Across the plains and buried all within
 Their cold embrace.

I sing the untold stretch of centuries--
 Not yet so far away but echoes bound
 Across wide, troubled spaces,
 From legendary places--

The golden age of buffalo and deer,
 The stern, idyllic days of tepee loves
 And hates, of tribal wars--these, too I sing.

I sing forgotten trails of pioneers--
 A silent memory to those who heard
 The first, far call of virgin promises;
 The broken wheel, the porous, whitening bones--
 Ghastly relics of a day now gone.

Unnumbered miles of waving grain, I sing;
Sleek cattle grazing on a thousand hills,
Broad-streeted cities, busy thoroughfares--
And over all a benediction reigns.
Old orders change, new systems take their place--
These, too, I sing.

I am the hoarse, receding cry of Yesterday;
I am the passionate voice of the Elusive Now;
I am the exultant prophecy of a Better Day--
I am the Prairie Singer. ⁴⁴

44. (Author's Manuscript)

Chapter V

LYRICS ON NATURE IN THE PRAIRIE

The poets who write on nature in the prairie region must necessarily be original, for rarely has anyone before them attempted to picture a land so devoid of conventional beauty. The charm of the prairie lies chiefly in its immensity and barrenness. The only beauty a new land can boast is such beauty as is intrinsic in wildness. A typical prairie land does not consist of beautifully level blue-grass meadows a-blaze with many-hued flowers and intersected by purling, bubbling brooks. Nor is it a land of well-kept lawns bordered with rank growths of shrubs and surrounded by spreading elms and towering pines alive with bird music. It is rather a vast empty waste stretching monotonously away into distances blurred by quivering heat waves---a brown, dusty landscape covered with sagebrush, thistles, milkweeds, and sandburrs. Here and there are bare yellow sandhills towering above the sagebrushed knolls seemingly proud to display their clean, wind-rippled surfaces. There are rattlesnakes, wheezing insects, long-legged jackrabbits, hooting owls, and yelping coyotes and prairie dogs. Very frequently came droughts, windstorms, and sand-storms.

Often the land seems entirely devoid of beauty.

Such an untamed, primitive world it is that has become so prominent in Western poetry. In this native wildness is a raw, elemental beauty that naturally appeals to poetic hearts. The present eager search for fresh, unconventional subject matter has, of course, added to the popularity of the prairie in recent poetry.

In the lyrics are expressions and figures as fresh and unconventional as the beauty that is being pictured. The best of the poems are spontaneous lyrical outbursts prompted by an emotion the land has instilled into the poets. Many are large, impressionistic pictures rather than descriptions centered on one singular aspect of the region. The life on the prairie--the animal and vegetable growth--is so natural a part of the landscape that many poems in themselves give a very complete picture of prairie nature.

There are no prairie poets who have devoted themselves particularly to nature, but there are very many who are now and then prompted to write nature lyrics. The Western poetry magazines have given an impetus to prairie poets, and innumerable nature lyrics have resulted. Perhaps, in time a prairie Wordsworth will emerge from the large group of poets.

Although very many of the poems give descriptions of the region as a whole, the more limited pictures are not lacking. There is scarcely a phase of prairie nature which poets have failed to notice. The favorite subjects are the barren landscape, the wind, and the coming of night.

In poetry as in actuality the prairie landscape is usually brown and hot and dry. Spring and winter scenes are rarely pictured because they are not particularly unique. A typical picture is P.Roy Brammel's "Desert".

Sage brush! Mile after mile,
 Quiet in the sun and shimmering;
 Ever in the sun, ever shimmering!

.....

Stream beds are dry, beaten paths
 of rabbits and sage coyotes
 That for keen thirst run the full length
 Of each ravine, and fall at last
 As did one here whose bones lie scattered,
 White as snow beneath the sun.
 God, the waste! the quivering waste!
 Where things grow up to die! ¹

1. Helen Rhoda Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p.22.

In a striking little "Lullaby for a Prairie Town"

Lee Andrew Weber begins:

Little prairie town
 You are a sleeping infant
 At the breast of a great brown woman.²

The brown prairie landscape is not without its appeal, though. It is restful, relaxing, and even some poetic souls prefer it to the prim beauty of cultivated nature. Helen Griffith McCarroll contrasts the two types of beauty.

I took a trip this fall to Kansas City.

Hill top and hill side bloomed in ordered
 loveliness.

All the beautiful sleek houses purred on
 velvet grasses.

All the well trained flowers grew as
 they were taught to grow,

Lawns, foliage, and houses---washed and
 brushed and polished,

Well fed and important. Even the trees grew
 Just as they were planned to grow--or seemed to,
 So cunningly had the people used them.

Its smoothness, its refinement, all its
 cleverness

And all its ponderous wealth quite took my
 breath away.

It overawed me! It enshrined me! Then it cloyed!

.....

Then I came back to Kansas--back to the prairies,
Back to the flat lands, where the earth undresses,
Stretches herself and rests, dazed but undaunted.

.....

Sunburned and wind blown, weed grown and dusty,
Now in this autumn time she rests exhausted.

.....

There is no cloying here--no soft arms nor
silken draperies.

Here she is unadorned--God, what a Beauty.³

Lew Andrew Weber's poems are full of quaint prairie figures. The barrenness of the land seems not to have impressed him so much as its quietness. This extract from a poem entitled "Dream, Prairie" is typical:

Hold, Prairie
Hold your dreams
In your brown arm-pits,
They would steal them.
They would spoil your fresh sweet lips,
Yea, even kill you,
And bury you---
Bury your soft brown body

3. "The Beauty" in Helen Rhoda Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 79.

Under their hard tombs,
 Their hard flat pavements.⁴

There are other happy pictures of a quiet, dreaming prairie. Badger Clark says:

Now the sleepy land is shirkin',
 Drowzin', smilin' in her dreams.⁵

In a poem entitled "The Prairie Wind" Willard Wattles says:

Hushed reverence of solemn prayer hallows the
 prairie everywhere; ⁶

The poetic attractiveness of the dreamy plains does not all consist in vast, dreamy emptiness. The fickleness of the prairie weather seems to make an almost personal appeal to the minds of the poets. The winds fit their moods or anger them or lead them into dreamy reverie. The rains, which the prairie men long earnestly wait and pray for, finally come and persist in staying until

The prairie is rotten with rain,⁷

4. The Midland, 310:165, April 1925.

5. "Southwestern June" in Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 126.

6. Willard Wattles's Sunflowers, p. 177.

7. "The Medicine Man" in Badger Clark's Sun and Saddle Leather, (9th ed.) p. 112.

The storms are awe-inspiring, and the sunsets unsurpassingly beautiful. There are certain months and seasons that have a particular charm, and the prairie mornings and evenings almost write themselves in poetry.

These weather descriptions are figurative, enervating, and delightful.

March takes her leave with wildly fluttering skirt.⁸

April is

Like a charming dainty girl, with her curls in
a whirl,

Rose leaf skin and teeth of pearl is April.⁹

And

May comes dancing down the days
Out of April's rain-swept ways.¹⁰

In harvest time

The west wind blows through ripened wheat
Swishing, swishing, swishing.

In August

summer swoons in autumn's arms, ¹²

8. "Karisko" in Edwin For Piper's Paintrock Road, p. 45.

9. "April" by Mac C. Patrick in Helen Rhoda Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 161.

10. "May" by Isabel Doerr in Helen Rhoda Hoopes Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 49.

11. "A Farmer's Son" Ibid.

12. "Indian Summer" in Lew Sarett's The Box of God, p.41.

In October

Swiftly the blizzard stretched a frozen arm
 From out the hollow night--
 Stripping the world of all her scarlet pomp,
 And muffling her in white. ¹³

And in winter

the Winter-Maker, hurdling.
 The rim-rock ridge, shook out his snowy hair
 Before him on the wind and heaped up the
 hollows--¹⁴

To the prairie day, the night, the morning
 and the evening the poets have given a great deal of
 attention. Prairie lovers are invariably struck by
 the glory of a prairie sunset and the clearness of
 the stars at night. Billy McCarroll says:

The sunset is a thief--
 For she has stolen from the coral trees
 Their redness--
 Leaving them black-stained
 That she
 Might wash her gold in ruby. ¹⁵

13. "October Snow" in Lew Sarett's The Box of God, p. 40.

14. "The Box of God" " " " " " " " p. 13.

15. "Sunset and Winter Trees" in Miss Hoopes's
Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 78.

After sunset, comes twilight

Spilling a purple coolness on the way.¹⁶

And then

the stars

Like little children trooping from their teepees,

Danced with nimble feet across the sky.¹⁷

And

The earth is a bronze bell swinging

It is night

All the insects have come

With their banjo throats humming.¹⁸

In the morning the

stars, like little children, go singing

down

The sky to the flute of the wind in the willow-
tree.¹⁹

And the day comes. Vachel Lindsay gives us a
description of a typical prairie day.

16. "The Twilight" by Margaret Perkins Briggs in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 24.

17. "The Box of God" in Lew Sarett's The Box of God, p. 15.

18. "Night on the Prairie" by Lee Andrew Weber in The Midland, 310:167, April 1925.

19. "The Box of God" in Lew Sarett's The Box of God, p. 18.

(In the beginning)

The sun is a huntress young,
The sun is a red, red joy,
The sun is an Indian girl,,
Of the tribe of Illinois.

(Mid-Morning)

The sun is a smoldering fire,
That creeps through the high great plain,
That leaves not a bush of cloud
To blossom with flowers of rain.

(Noon)

The sun is wou^d/red deer,
That treads pale grass in the skies,
Shaking his golden horns,
Flashing his baleful eyes.

(Sunset)

The sun is an eagle old,
There in the windless West
Atop of the spirit-cliffs
He builds him a crimson nest.²⁰

About the wind numberless poems have been
written. Its poetic effects seem to tally with its

20. "An Indian Summer Day on the Prairie" in The Congo,
p. 66.

more materialistic ones, and to vary as greatly. Undoubtedly, more prairie poems have been written on the wind than on any one other subject. The poets sing to the wind and about the wind; some love it and some hate it; some it rouses into a frenzy and some it makes quietly reminiscent. A few of the most striking, unique wind poems are Edwin Ford Piper's "The Wind":

I am a hawk on gusty curving wings
At play with clouds....
And in the narrow canyons
Where I am trapped I struggle...

Lunging, fluttering,
Beating the earth I fall
With gusty curving wings.²¹

Ruth Lichtenstein's "A La Belle Etoile":

The wind
Sits drowsily upon the hearth of night
And purrs a slender cat-song.²²

Helen Griffith McCarroll's "Wind of the Prairie":

You shrieking, moaning, wailing wind of
the prairie!
Whose spirit are you?
Call thus the Redskins
Whom white men slew?

21. Paintrock Road, p. 81.

22. The Midland, 310:261, Aug. 1925.

Say! Are you calling and crying
For the lost soul of you? ²³

and Whitelaw Saunder's "Broken Rhythms:

Knowing a moment's rest,
Then taunting a writhing tree,
O You, Who bade the waves be calm
Quiet me! ²⁴

To the poets the wind seems to be a rather melancholy message-bearer. It arouses all sorts of questions in poetic minds and produces various emotional states. Such effects as these are complained of in the wind poems:

The wind is full of my false love's voice
As he sneers and scoffs at me---²⁵

They need not bother to remind me of
Old griefs blown down the centuries--²⁶

Wind in the night,
Restless wind,
Unhappy, ever-wandering prairie wind--
Art thou, too, lost and exiled as am I? ²⁷

23. Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 81.

24. " " " " " " p. 102

25. "Wintry Winds " by Gertrude Kirtland in Ibid, p. 73.

26. "These Winds" by Margaret Perkins Briggs in Ibid, p. 25.

27. "Prairie Wind" by Thomas E. Moore in Ibid, p. 87.

I feel the 'autumn day is twisted, warped,
and bent;

I am tired to the very lining of my soul.²⁸

Prairie pictures would not be complete without sand hills and sand and dust storms. The storms are a natural result of a strong wind blowing over a barren landscape; and the yellow, glistening sand hills which Billy McCarroll describes as

only sand and withered grasses,

And some plum-bushes on my nearer slopes.²⁹

are not an unusual sight in some parts of the land. Bruce W. McDaniel has a graphic description of a wind storm in a sandy region.

Sand, sand, sand, sand,

Cutting like sharp steel;

Mad sand, wild sand, sands that whirl and reel,

Piling, curling, boiling, turning;

Sands that dash and wheel.³⁰

In the less sandy regions the dust storms of the dry summer months are wholly as unpleasant as the

28. "November Winds" by Ursula Miller. Author's manuscript.

29. "The Spirit of the Kansas Sand Hills" in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 78.

30. "A Desert Sandstorm" in Bruce W. McDaniel's The Desert, p. 46.

the sand storms. Lee Andrew Weber's poem on "Prairie Dust" begins:

Here is the dust
Whirling in the wind.

Here is dust
Brown arrows--
Brown prairie thoughts,
Blowing in my mind. 31

Rain is usually a rarity in a prairie region. Not until the land and its life fairly ache for rain, does it finally come. Badger Clark has a very real picture of the coming of the rain and the landscape before and after:

The dry wind mourns among the hills, a-huntin'
trees and grass,
Then down the desert flats it rises higher
And sweeps a rollin' dust--storm up and
flings it through the pass
And fills the evenin' west with smolderin' fire.

.....

The wind comes off the desert like it

brushed a bed of coals;
The sickly range grass withers down and fails;

.....

The mesas heave and quiver in the noon.

.....

And the whole hot land seems dyin' in a dream.

.....

Then the lightnin's gash the heavens and the
thunder jars the world
And the gray of fallin' water wraps the plains,

.....

Have you ever seen a mountain stretch and rub
its eyes?
Or bare hills lift their streamin' faces up
and thank the Lord,
Fairly tremblin' with their gladness and surprise?

.....

Just a whole dead world sprang back to life and
laughin' in a day! ³²

On the fauna and flora of the prairie few
poets have written, for the very evident/reason that
there is not much plant and animal life. What there

32. "The Rains" in Sun and Saddle Leather, p. 144.

is, is gray and brown and falls naturally into the landscape pictures. Sagebrush, sunflowers, willows, and cottonwoods constitute the chief plant life. Frequently the goldenrod is mentioned, and the Dakota poets write much of the Pasque flower. The distinctive animal life is yet more rare and colorless. There are wheezing insects, and coyotes, prairie-dogs, hawks, owls, meadow-larks, and rattle snakes. Few of these in themselves make a very charming poetic picture, and poets rarely attempt their description without giving them the landscape background. In an uncultivated prairie the meadow-lark is practically the only song-bird, and he is yet the only one poets put into pictures of a distinctive prairie region. Since man has taken the prairie into his hands and planted trees on it, more and brighter birds have come.

Of the few descriptions of plant life these extracts are typical:

Trees on the plains are braver trees
Than those found elsewhere;³³

I know I, too, should weep to be
A solitary willow tree,

33. "Trees on the Plains" by Leslie Wallace in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 116.

Beside a stream;
 Standing allday where I could see
 My truant self smile back at me.³⁴

Look down the crick now, right above the bend--
 The big ol' cotton wood there, featherin' up
 All by itself--³⁵

Anemone of purple hue,
 Emerging from the grasses brown,
 Has come to make her spring debut
 In furry mantled, satin gown.³⁶

Catching fire from the setting sun,
 The gold of an autumn dawn,
 File on file in bright array,
 The sunflowers march along.³⁷

Of the animal life on the prairie John A.
 Lomax gives us a very compact picture in his poem
 entitled "The Old Mackenzie Trail".

 the yellow-breasted desert lark
 Cries shrill and lonely from a dead mesquite,

Its

34. "The Weeping Willow" by Margaret Louis Anderson in
 Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 18.

Its quivering notes set in a minor key;

.....

The coyote's howl is heard at dark from some
Low-lying hill; companioned by the loafer
wolf

They yelp in concert to the far-off stars,
Or gnaw the bleached bones in savage rage
That lie unburied by the grass-grown paths.

The prairie dogs play sentinel by day
And backward slips the badger to his den;
The whirl, the fatal strike of rattlesnake,
A staring buzzard floating in the eerie blue,³⁸

Since the prairie has become a land of trees,
it has also become the home of birds, The meadow lark
remains the favorite but has to share poetic attention.
Edna Osborne Whitcomb sings:

I am a prairie child!
I love the prairie birds;
Grackles in herds,
Thrasher, bluebird, crow;³⁹

And William Savage Johnson says:

I thank the April snow

38. Songs of the Cattle Trail and Cow Camp, p. 154.

39. "I am a Prairie Child" in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 122.

Whose magic sent from wood
 And field a hungry brood
 To be my friends a blessed day or so;-

Hedge-sparrow, yellow-billed,
 Black-capped, the cardinal
 Of joyous heart, and all
 The mouse-breast juncos.⁴⁰

Of the few poems on particular birds one of the prettiest is Ruth Bender's "The Yellow Warbler".

What is that! Did you see?
 That gleam through the leaves,
 So tiny and quick--
 See it flash up the tree!
 Here it is---no, 'tis there---
 Now yonder---and now where?
 Too airy and bright
 To be called a bird;
 It must be a bit
 Of winged sunlight.
 That silvery strain
 Like rippling water--
 Could it be a song?

40. "April Snow in Kansas" in Miss Hoopes's Contemporary Kansas Poetry, p. 71.

Hark, there 'tis again!
 Tinkling and singing,
 Trilling and ringing,
 Clear and sweet. Do you know
 Perhaps it might be
 The sun beam's echo.⁴¹

Poets frequently try to imitate the rhythm and spirit of the meadow lark's song. Typical efforts are these:

Howdy, Mister Meadow Lark
 Kinder like the mornin', don't you?
 Where you been this tough ol' winter?
 Hey there, tell a feller, won't you?

Where'd you get that sporty coat,
 An' that shiny yellor collar?
 Bet the new black tie you're wearin'
 Cost you pretty nigh a dollar.⁴²

O, I am the bird of the fields,
 And I sing at the first hint of spring.

.....

I sing O, how sweetly I sing!
 I'm in rapture aground or a-wing;

41. (Author's Manuscript)

42. "The Meadow Lark" in Elliott C. Lincoln's Ranch, p. 32.

I'm the lark of the fields and I come
with the first hint of spring.⁴³

What verses of permanent value there are in this profusion of nature lyrics, time will tell. But there are many spirited little lyrics that ring true to the spirit of the land---many that are a natural embodiment of the emotion aroused by the bigness and wildness of the prairie. Others are merely simple little rhymes, but altogether they give a very complete picture of nature on the plains. The poets have at least succeeded in making their readers feel and see the beauty that the prairie does have and, as a result, have inspired in prairie-dwellers a greater love for their land.

For, don't you mark? We're made so that we love
First when we see them painted, things we have
passed
Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see.

.....

art was given for that;
God uses us to help each other so,
Lending our minds out.⁴⁴

43. "The Meadow Lark" by Ursula Miller. (Author's manuscript).

44. Browning's "Fra Lippo Lippi".

Chapter VI

NEIHARDT'S EPIC CYCLE

Whether or not John G. Neihardt has done well what he has attempted to do, he undoubtedly deserves credit for his serious, untiring effort to enrich American literature and for his success in reviving interest in the heroes of the "Great American epic period". Critics clash severely on the literary value of his work but all equally praise his choice of material. They agree that he has chosen "stark saga-stuff" for the theme of his epics.

A conviction of his task seems to have been born in Mr. Neihardt, and his life did not fail giving him the necessary background. He was born January 8, 1881, in Sharpsburg, Illinois. Five years later his acquaintance with the great Western plains began. He lived in northwestern Kansas on the banks of the upper Solomon with his pioneering grandparents. Many of his prairie descriptions are written from memories of these early years. While the boy was thus unconsciously gathering inspiration for his life task, his widowed mother was struggling in Kansas City to support her

other children. During Neihardt's tenth year the family moved to Wayne, Nebraska; and in that frontier town the poet grew up. When only twelve he began writing verses, and since then poetry has been the one aim of his life. During his boyhood he hungered for reading material, but the family had no money to buy books. His first cherished volumes---Tennyson's Idylls of the King and Browning's Selected Poems ---were secured as premiums for soap wrappers collected by his mother and sisters.

Soon after his arrival in Wayne he entered the Nebraska Normal College in that town, and for three years paid for his tuition by ringing the class bell twice every fifty minutes of the day. There he attracted the attention of able men who gave him all possible help and encouragement. At fifteen he read Virgil at sight in the original. Greek was not taught in Wayne. He conquered it alone, after he was thirty, in order that he might read his favorite authors --Aeschylus and Homer---in the original.

After his graduation he became the family's chief support. No task pleased him long. He worked on the farm, taught school, kept books, served as porter in a restaurant,

worked as a reporter for a newspaper, and tried various other tasks. Always his dreams and his urge to write interfered with his work. Occasionally he was dismissed, and very often he grew tired and drifted on to something new.

While he was yet a youth, the family moved to Bancroft, Nebraska, at the edge of the Omaha Indian Reservation. Here he associated intimately with the Omaha tribe, who nicknamed him Tae Nuga Zhinga, (Little Buffalo Bill). It was during these years that he gained the insight into Indian psychology which he uses in The Song of the Indian Wars.

Although the necessity for labor did not cease during the next few years, Neighardt did find time to write. His first published compositions were Indian tales. These stories found favor in the magazines but did not detract him from his first purpose---the writing of poetry. In 1907 appeared his first volume of lyrics---A Bundle of Myrrh. Later this volume and two others were published in collected form under the title The Quest. This early poetry has been extravagantly praised but has so nearly the same qualities as the lyrical descriptions in his narrative poems

that it need receive no particular attention here.

Mr. Neihardt has several other noteworthy productions outside of his epic cycle. The Splendid Wayfaring is a prose tale of the exploits of Jedediah Smith---a comrade of the epic heroes---who later discovered and explored the great central route from the Missouri river to the Pacific ocean. It is a straight, direct, historical tale and a splendid background for the episodes in his songs. .In Poetic Values: Their Realities and Our Need of Them Mr. Neihardt outlines his poetic philosophy. He has written two one-act dramas, Eight Hundred Rubles and Agrippina. His Collected Poems have now been published in two volumes.

In 1911 the legislature of Nebraska conferred upon Mr. Neihardt the title, Poet Laureate. Since then he has been appointed honorary Professor of Poetry at the University of Nebraska, and the degree of Doctor of Letters has been granted him.

With his mother, his four children, and his wife, Mona Martinsen, who is a sculptress, Neihardt now lives on Lake Taneycomo in the Ozark Mountains near Branson, Missouri. He is at present

preparing the fourth and final volume of his epic cycle--The Song of the Messiah.

Mr. Neihardt would have us believe that his interest in the heroes of his epic period was first kindled "at the age of six when, clinging to the forefinger of my father, I discovered the Missouri River from a bluff top at Kansas City".¹ The stories of the heroes of the river fascinated him, and his epic concept seems to have gradually matured in him. "As I grew older and came to possess more of my inheritance, I began to see that what had enthralled me was, in fact, of the stuff of sagas, a genuine epic cycle in the rough. Furthermore, I realized that this raw material had been undergoing a process of digestion in my consciousness, corresponding in a way to the process of infinite repetition and fond elaboration which, as certain scholars tell us, foreran the heroic narratives of old time."²

Like Joaquin Miller, Mr. Neihardt saw the significance, the epic greatness, of the

1. Prefatory note in The Song of Three Friends and the Song of Hugh Glass, p. XI.

2. Ibid. p. XII.

conquering of the wilderness and the clash between the two great races contending for it. After the realization of the possibility of writing the American Epic concerning this last westward advance of the white race fully dawned upon him, he dedicated his life to this task. His stories and lyrics were in demand, but he sacrificed his probable success with them to his greater purpose.

Neihardt's epic concept in its entirety is a vast one. "He sees the "American Epic""not as a thing in itself, but rather as one phase of the whole race life from the beginning; indeed, the final link in that long chain of heroic periods stretching from the region of the Euphrates eastward into India and Westward to our own Pacific Coast!"³

The American epic period, then, is the time of the last possible Westward migration of the White race; and this significant movement involved the exploration and conquest of the land between the Missouri river and the Pacific ocean. The period extends from 1822 to 1890. Mr. Neihardt has based the first two parts of his cycle on a representative portion of the period--on the expeditions of the men who ascended the river under Ashley and Henry in 1822 and 1823. The

3. Prefatory note to the Song of Three Friends, p. VII.-

episodes in the Songs are taken from the body of legend that grew up about heroes among these trappers and traders. Neihardt calls his material "The Ashley-Henry Saga" -- "the forgotten history of Unheralded heroes".

The poet spared no pains in fitting himself for the task to which he had dedicated his life. He searched all available records and periodicals and consulted old pioneers who knew the land and time of which he was to write. In 1908 he descended the Missouri in an open boat and ascended the Yellowstone to acquaint himself with the country. He made every attempt to live again the lives of his heroes. His material is well choseⁿ, he knows it well, and his experience has fitted him to do his task admirably.

The three finished parts of the cycle are: The Song of Three Friends; The Song of Hugh Glass; and The Song of the Indian Wars. The Song of Hugh Glass, which is the second part of the series, was the first to be published. It appeared in 1914. Three and a half years later appeared The Song of Three Friends, which is designed to be the first of the series. In 1919 it was given the Poetry Society

prize of five hundred dollars for the best volume of verse published by an American during that year. After four and a half more years of labor appeared the most significant and most complicated part of the cycle---The Song of the Indian Wars. The fourth part---The Song of the Messiah-- is now in preparation.

The stories related in the first two parts of the cycle may be briefly sketched. In 1822 William H. Ashley put into the Missouri Republican an advertisement for one hundred "enterprising young men" to ascend the Missouri river under the command of Major Andrew Henry. Among the men who responded to the call were three fast friends-- Fink, Carpenter, and Talbeau. Fink was famous for his broad jokes, his hot temper, ~~and his~~ ~~broad jokes, his hot temper,~~ and his almost super-human strength. Carpenter was a tall, quiet, handsome man, who could fight skillfully, and smile at the same time. Talbeau, who was a little, terrier-like fighter, had won the admiration of the other two and had been adopted into the friendship. To prove their mutual love and trust Fink and Carpenter, who prided themselves on their expert

marksmanship, occasionally shot a cup of whiskey from each other's heads.

These three had ascended with Henry's party to the mouth of the Yellowstone and then with nine other men had gone to spend the winter among the Blood Indians. There Fink fell in love with an Indian girl, who loved Carpenter. Jealousy grew in Fink, and a fight resulted, in which Carpenter won. Talbeau continued loving both the men and was in despair when he thought that the friendship must break up.

In the spring the party returned to Henry's fort at the mouth of the Yellowstone, and again a fight almost occurred. Then at Talbeau's suggestion they agreed to forgive and again shoot the cup. Fink tossed the coin, and the first shot fell to him. Carpenter called aside Talbeau and willed to him his gun and other property. Fink shot and killed Carpenter.

After that Neihardt's story is no longer folk legend, but his own invention. History says that later when Fink admitted that he did it purposely, Talbeau instantly drew his pistol--Carpenter's gun---and shot him.⁴

4. Lucy Lockwood Hazard's The Frontier in America, p.132.

In Neihardt's story Talbeau does not shoot Fink but with Carpenter's gun drives him east over the dry, barren land until stricken with pity and remorse for exacting so cruel a vengeance he decides to forgive---only to find Fink's body half-eaten by crows.

The Song of Hugh Glass is the story of a man who ascended the river in Ashley's party a year later than the Henry expedition. At the Ree villages Ashley stopped to trade for horses. The party was attacked by the Indians; and a battle occurred in which Hugh Glass, a silent old hunter, sacrificed his own safety to rescue a young lad belonging to the party. Ashley sent for Colonel Leavenworth and Major Henry to help fight the Rees. After the battle Henry's eighty remaining men again started north overland, and Hugh Glass and Jamie, the young lad, went with them. On the fifth day Hugh was attacked by a bear and found nearly dead by Jamie. Henry's party hurried on and left Jamie and Le Bon to care for Hugh. In the few days following in which Hugh lived, on, Le Bon played on Jamie's

fears until together they forsook Hugh and told Henry's party that he had died. With him Le Bon took Hugh's knife, his gun, and flint. Hugh finally awoke, discovered his plight, and resolved to live long enough to have vengeance on his cowardly deserters. Jamie, especially, he could not forgive. His legs had been injured and walking was impossible, but the thirst for revenge was so urgent that he began the long, painful crawl which Julius T. House calls "the most detailed account of physical suffering and endurance extant in poetry".⁵ When Hugh arrived at Henry's Post, Jamie was gone. In his long search he forgives him and finally finds him in a Piegan lodge sick, blind, and frenzied with remorse.

The last of the three poems--The Song of the Indian Wars--is not based on a particular episode, and the action is much more intricate and involved than in the other two. It deals with the final climax of the period--the clash of the

5. "Notes" in The Song of Three Friends and the Song of Hugh Glass, p. 299.

nations. In his preface Neihardt says the poem "deals with the last great fight for the bison pastures of the Plains between the westering white men and the prairie tribes---the struggle for the right of way between the Missouri River and the Pacific ocean".⁶ The largeness of the plan necessarily results in confusion, and the narrative becomes a jumbled mass of battles and heroes. Of this work Lucy Lockwood Hazard says: "A large order---and it is hardly to be wondered at that the result is in places confused and sketchy. The confusion is augmented by Mr. Neihardt's inability or reluctance to decide which characters are to play the role of heroes and which of villains. He describes himself in the preface as a "Custer partizan" but his hero--worship fails to vitalize the section of the poem devoted to Custer's last stand. Custer remains throughout the action, elusive and nebulous."⁷

It is to be lamented that his truly epic

6. Preface to Song of the Indian Wars. p. 8.

7. The Frontier in American Literature: Thomas Y. Crowell Co. New York, 1927. p. 134.

concept and his thorough acquaintance with his material did not enable Mr. Neihardt to put a true epic spirit into his verses. The rough, ready Western trappers become in his hand romantic heroes motivated by intense sentiment. The brutal Fink becomes a moping, sentimental lover; and after the love affair the poem is not an objective narrative of swift, primitive action, but a long psychological analysis of the successive mental states of his heroes. In The Song of Hugh Glass the same thing is true. We do not see crude, rough men in the sort of action naturally fitted to their character and country. The emphasis is not on the external action but on the internal motives of two sentimental heroes tragically involved in a friendship. In The Song of the Indian Wars Neihardt again plays on sentiment. In spite of the fact that he realizes that the doom of the Indian is a naturally result of the "westerling urge" of the white race, he makes the death of Crazy Horse and the surrender of his people tragically pathetic.

A true epic is alive with the spirit of the folk of who^m it tells. If it is put together

by an individual author, the poet is careful to project nothing of himself into the narrative. His lines must ring true to the spirit of the life of which he writes. The diction, the figures, the descriptions, and the philosophy should not be the poet's but ^{should represent} the thinking of the folk. The narrative should be a simple outlay of the spirit of the time---of the action, the conditions of the life, the beliefs, and superstitions---without any inserted comments from the author himself. It should be a natural, untainted outgrowth of the folk---told in the same raw, vigorous manner in which it had been told from mouth to mouth---and should be such that the folk of whom it is written could themselves best appreciate and understand it.

It is in his manner of telling these primitive tales that Mr. Neihardt fails of his purpose. The first two Songs should be brief, vigorous narratives. In The Splendid Wayfaring Mr. Neihardt tells the story of The Song of Three Friends well in a page and a half. The poem is one hundred ^{and} twenty-six pages long. Lucy Lockenwood says: "As a result, of course, the frontier is diluted with a good deal of Neihardt. No^w Mr.

Neihardt's poetry per se is neither better nor worse than that of many contemporary versifiers. But when a poet presumes to "approach that body of precious saga stuff which I have called the Western American Epos" (I use Mr. Neighardt's own words), and offers himself as the Homer of the Frontier, the reader has a right to expect that the "precious saga stuff" shall be treated in a style worthy of epic tradition."⁸ Mr. Neihardt is seemingly so intent on ornamenting his language and giving his poetic temperament full play, that he must needs stop his story to impress his readers with his art and erudition. Naturally the poems become artificial and rhetorical. They are full of painfully elaborate figures that attract attention to themselves and detract much from the primitive spirit the poems should have. The nature descriptions are such exaggerated, personified figures that the spirit of the land is long lost in them. Below are typical examples:

They saw the stealthy wraith-arms of the night
Grove for the day to strangle it;⁹

8. The Frontier in American Literature, p. 129.

9. The Song of Three Friends and The Song of Hugh Glass, p. 26.

the year
Was painted for its death.¹⁰

the gray sky bled
With morning, like a wound.¹¹

Then he came to where, awhirl
With Spring's wild rage, the snow-born Titan girl,
A skyey wonder on her virgin face,
Receives the virile Yellowstone's embrace
And bears the lusty Seeker for the Sea.
A bleak horizon-wide serenity
Clung round the valley where the twain lay dead.
A winding sheet was on the marriage bed.¹²

Here at length was born
Upon the southern slopes the baby Spring,
A timid, fretful, ill-begotten thing,
A-suckle at the Winter's withered paps;¹³

Mr. Neihardt's diction is often as false

10. The Song of Three Friends and The Song of Hugh Glass, p. 30.
11. Ibid, p. 111.
12. Ibid, p. 228.
13. Ibid, p. 239.

to the spirit of his heroes as his figures are.
How far would Fink or Hugh Glass have appreciated
a passage like this?:

The moon now cleared the world's end, and
the owl
Gave voice unto the wizardry of light;
While in some dim-lit chancel of the night,
Snouts to the goddess, wolfish corybants
Intoned their wild antiphonary chants--
The oldest, saddest worship in the world.¹⁴

or this vague, blurred description of the sky they
knew so well?:

So lapsed the drowsy aeon of the night--
A strangely tensile moment in a trance.
And then, as quickened to somnambulance,
The heavens, imperceptibly in motion,
Were altered as the upward deeps of ocean
Diluted with a seepage of the moon.¹⁵

Neihardt's many classical allusions seem
especially foreign and irrelevant in the raw,
primitive material he is using. Carpenter seemed--

14. The Song of Three Friends and The Song of Hugh Glass, p. 144.

15. Ibid, p. 174.

Some Gothic fighting god----

Strayed from the dim Hercy[?]mian woods of old.¹⁶

And Jamie was

A Ganymedes haunted by a Goth.¹⁷

Of the frozen Missouri the poet says:

There lay the stubborn Prairie Titan bound,
To wait the far-off Heraclean thaw,¹⁸

Lucy Lockwood Hazard says: "Now classical allusions may find a place in a literary epic, such as the Divina Commedia or Paradise Lost. But they have no place in a folk epic such as the Iliad or Beowulf or (to use Mr. Neihardt's own modest climax) The Song of Three Friends."¹⁹

Mr. Neihardt's tales are told in couplets, but they/ verse is managed so skillfully that one is scarcely aware of the rhyme. Critics complain, however, that his smooth, classical verse form is not the proper medium in which to relate the rough adventures of the pioneer West. In long poems the

17. The Song of Three Friends and The Song of Hugh Glass, p. 131.

18. Ibid., p. 227.

19. The Frontier in American Literature, p. 130.

even swing tends to become monotonous.

Although Mr. Neihardt's verse is too smooth, his diction too polished, and his lines lack the terse vigor naturally fitted to his theme, his poems are not without merit. There are many beautiful, lyrical passages and truly effective touches. As Red Cloud rose to speak at "The Council on the Powder"--

men felt thunder in the hush of him.²⁰

Of Crazy Horse the poet says:

And there was that about him like a wall
To shut men out.²¹

Of Fall he says:

And everywhere he rode
A suck of men grew after him and flowed
To forward.²²

When the white men came into "The Village of Crazy Horse"--

Tepees spilled
A half clad rabble, and the valley filled
With uproar,²³

20. The Song of the Indian Wars, p. 50.

21. " " " " " " ,p. 214.

22. " " " " " " ,p.189.

23. " " " " " " ,p. 154.

Jamie discovered that Hugh was yet alive

And in the lad's heart something like a lark

Sang morning.²⁴

A great part of the Songs consist of nature descriptions. There is scarcely any phenomena^{on-} of nature in the prairie region that Neihardt has not attempted to picture. In The Song of Three Friends is a description of the Aurora Borealis, of a prairie fire, and of the Dakota Bad Lands; in The Song of Hugh Glass^{there} is a blizzard scene; and in The Song of the Indian Wars is a picture of the locust swarm. Of his better nature descriptions these are typical:

Out of a roseless dawn the heat-pale sun
Beheld them toiling northward once again--
A hundred horses and a hundred men
Hushed in a windless swelter. Day on day
The same white dawn o'ertook them on their
way;

And day long in the white glare sang no bird;
But only shrill grasshoppers clicked and
whirred,

24. The Song of Three Friends and the Song of Hugh Glass, p. 143.

As though the heat were vocal. All the while
 The dwindling current lengthened, mile on mile,
 Meandrous in a labyrinth of sand.²⁵

And every day the hot wind, puff on puff,
 Assailed them; every night they heard it sough
 In thickets prematurely turning sere.

Then came the sudden breaking of the year.

Abruptly in a waving afternoon
 The hot wind ceased, as fallen in a swoon
 With its own heat.²⁶

Occasionally the narrative becomes truly
 epic in tone, and the story proceeds in a direct
 straightforward manner.

And when

The jaded troopers trotted home again
 There wasn't any cheering. Six of those
 Clung dizzily to bloody saddle-bows;
 And Bingham was the seventh and was dead;

25. The Song of Three Friends the The Song of Hugh
 Glass, p. 19.

26. Ibid, p. 25.

And Bowers with less hair upon his head
 Than arrows in his vitals, prayed to die.
 He did that night.²⁷

The last speech of Crazy Horse has an epic dignity:

I had my village and my pony herds
 On Powder where the land was all my own.
 I only wanted to be let alone.

I did not want to fight. The Gray Fox sent
 His soldiers. We were poorer when they went;
 Our babies died, for many lodges burned
 And it was cold. We hoped again and turned
 Our faces Westward. It was just the same
 Out yonder on the Rosebud. Gray Fox came.
 The dust his soldiers made was high and long.
 I fought him and I whipped him. Was it wrong
 To drive him back? That country was my own.
 I only wanted to be let alone.

I did not want to see my people die.
 They say I murdered Long Hair and they lie.
 His soldiers came to kill us and they died.²⁸

However questionable the poetic excellence

27. The Song of the Indian Wars, p. 70.

28. " " " " " " . p. 229.

of his songs, Mr. Neihardt deserves much credit for the interest he has awakened in the period, for the resurrection of forgotten heroes, and for his devotion to his task. Mr. Neihardt's best years are yet before him, and it may be that as his epic concept further matures in him he will concentrate less on his art and allow his verse to be molded by the spirit of his heroes---to develop unconsciously into a natural embodiment of his "stark saga- stuff".

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

The Western world has served as an inspiration for so many poems that the great task in this study has been, not finding material, but eliminating it. Very many deserving poets and good verses that have been keenly appreciated are not mentioned in this work. They have contributed to the spirit of it, if not to the immediate content.

It remains yet to be seen how Time, the final critic, will evaluate this early Western poetry. It seems to be rich in the lure of the land. The besmudged covers of the library books on Western poetry show that the verses have, at least, not failed in the chief purpose of literature---the giving of pleasure. The crude, big-hearted heroes of the plains have so entirely won the admiration of red-blooded American boys that it seems the best of the cowboy ballads must stay alive. Piper's strong, rugged chronicle, shaped by the life and land of which he wrote, is valuable, inside history. Neihardt's noble effort "to preserve

the great race-mood of courage in the period which is beyond question the great American epic period" will undoubtedly be remembered for its rich suggestiveness. And it seems that to preserve the spirit of the land and the glad emotions it has awakened in men's hearts we need a few of Badger Clark's lyrics. All these, at least, serve as a tempting, suggestive beginning. Poets are seemingly groping in the dark; they are not yet certain wherein lie the chief poetic values of the prairie. They are experimenting with raw material; but a fruit that has attained such a healthy growth will naturally ripen in time. Badger Clark says, "Western poetry is only beginning. If little England could produce the magnificent galaxy of artists that shine in her history for the past five centuries, what will this West of ours produce when we really get rooted here?" ¹

1. In a letter to the writer.

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